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日本のロールプレイングゲームへのガイド

A Guide to Japanese Role-Playing Games

BBJRPG01
BITMAP 2021

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A Guide to Japanese Role-Playing Games

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Info Bar Key
Each game has an info bar which shows its official English name (or Japanese name if none available), along with the developer, the date the first version was released, and the platforms the game was released on. This list only includes platforms with original ports – that is, emulated versions are not listed.

3DO - 3DO
3DS - Nintendo 3DS
AND - Android
ARC - Arcade
C64 - Commodore 64
DC - SEGA Dreamcast
DS - Nintendo DS
FC - Famicom
FDS - Famicom Disk System
FM7 - Fujitsu FM-7
FMT - FM Towns
GB - Game Boy
GBA - Game Boy Advance
GBC - Game Boy Color
GC - Nintendo Game Cube
GG - SEGA Game Gear
GEN - Genesis
IBM - IBM PC/DOS
IOS - iPhone/iPad/iPod Touch
MCD - Mega CD
MD - Mega Drive
MOB - Mobile
MSX - MSX
MSX2 - MSX2
MSXR - MSX Turbo-R
MZ - Sharp MZ
N64 - Nintendo 64
NDS - Nintendo DS
NES - Nintendo Ent. System
NGAGE - N-Gage
NGCD - NEOGEO CD
NGPC - NEOGEO Pocket Color
NSW - Nintendo Switch
PC60 - PC-6001
PC80 - PC-8001
PC88 - PC-8801
PC98 - PC-9801
PCE - PC Engine
PCECD - PC Engine CD
PCFX - PC FX
PS1 - PlayStation
PS2 - PlayStation 2
PS3 - PlayStation 3
PS4 - PlayStation 4
PSP - PlayStation Portable
PSV - PlayStation Vita
SAT - SEGA Saturn
SCD - SEGA CD
SFC - Super Famicom
SMS - SEGA Master System
SNES - Super Nintendo
TG16 - TurboGrafx-16
TGCD -TurboGrafx-CD
WII - Wii
WIIU - Wii U
WIN - Windows
WS - WonderSwan
WSC - WonderSwan Color
X1 - Sharp X1
X360 - Xbox 360
X68 - Sharp X68000
XB - Xbox
XB1 - Xbox One

Introduction

I first became enamoured with Japanese role-playing games when I was nine years old, thanks to a strategy guide in *Nintendo Power* in late 1990. It was a whole issue devoted to a then-forthcoming RPG called *Final Fantasy*. I studied it thoroughly, preparing myself for when I could actually get the game, which ended up being a Christmas present. I wasn't disappointed.

However, it was rough going for budding RPG fans of the era. While the genre was on fire in Japan, that success didn't quite translate outside of the country. American boys, I was told, only liked action and sports games. I liked these too, but I also enjoyed the sprawling adventures, fantastical plots, and enormous bestiaries role-playing games had.

For the 16-bit era, I elected to get a SEGA Genesis, mostly because of *Sonic the Hedgehog*, but I was exposed to a few RPGs of the time, like *Phantasy Star II* and *Lunar: The Silver Star*. But things changed in late 1996, when my little brother bought a cheap SNES at Funcoland. I mentioned this offhand to one of my friends at school, who returned the next day with *Final Fantasy III*, raving about how awesome it was and demanding that I play it. He wasn't wrong – I was immediately in love, and ended up buying my own copy at a local video store. Afterwards came *Chrono Trigge*r and *Secret of Mana*. I dug out my Genesis again and grabbed *Phantasy Star IV* and *Lunar: Eternal Blue*. On 3rd September 1997, the day *Final Fantasy VII* came out, and both my brother and I pooled our money so we could buy it, along with a brand new PlayStation. From then, I was hooked. Almost every new RPG that came out, I had to buy. This was a great time to get into Japanese RPGs too, since the success of *Final Fantasy VII* had opened the floodgates for more of them to come out in English.

The book you're reading is the culmination of 30 years of playing and studying Japanese RPGs. It's not just my experiences, though, as it also includes contributions from over 30 other writers, covering well over 600 games. The definition of "Japanese RPG" has been (and will continue to be) argued over for a long time, and there are tons more that aren't featured here. But we've chosen a wide variety of the best, most popular, and most interesting titles released since their inception back in 1982 all the way up to the present day. My hope is that you'll come into this book looking to learn more about your favourite titles, find yourself discovering some of the lesser known entries, and gain an understanding of the genre's diversity, especially across the many, many, many games that have never been released in English, and some that are even forgotten in their native country.

This book is organised into a few major sections. First, there are some essays that explain our definition of a Japanese RPG, and a quick overview of their history over the years, as well as some other related articles. The bulk of the book features reviews of various titles. First, we'll go over the Japanese PC titles that birthed the genre, including many works by Nihon Falcom. Subsequent chapters look at the most prolific franchises in the genre, including *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy*, *Shin Megami Tensei*, and *Tales of...* Then we'll look at small series, before drilling down into individual titles. After this, chapters focus on different sub-genres: action RPGs, strategy RPGs, Rogue-likes, first-person dungeon crawlers, and monster-collecting games. The last chapter includes various miscellaneous pieces, like MMORPGs based on Japanese franchises, Western-developed JRPGs, and a handful of adult RPGs and sports RPGs.

Please enjoy!

Kurt Kalata
January 2021

Contributors

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What is a JRPG?

What is a "JRPG", exactly? Literally, it just means "a role-playing game from Japan", but over the years it's become the name of a sub-genre, a very specific style of RPG, whose evolutionary branch led to a vastly different product from Western RPGs. So when did this happen, and where did the term come from?

In the early '80s, most RPGs in Japan were imported from the United States, and much of the locally developed software was based roughly on *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, or some combination of the two. The real flashpoint for this style of game was *Dragon Quest*, published by Enix for the Nintendo Famicom in May 1986.

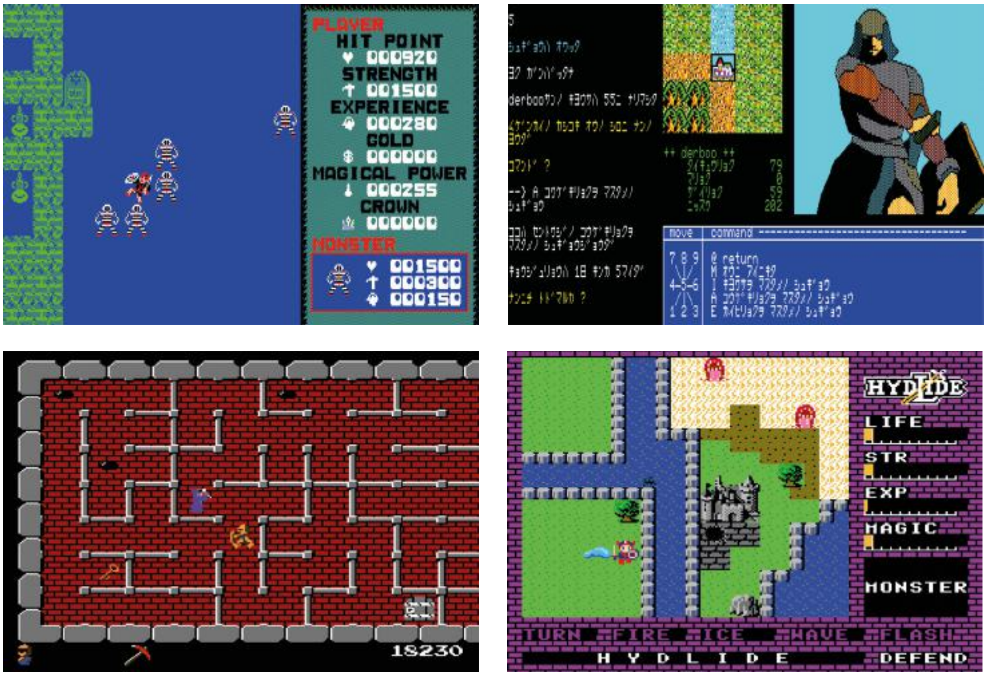
Broadly speaking, *Dragon Quest* was successful because it took the mainstays of RPGs – that is, the feeling of a sprawling journey, combined with character growth – and put them into a form that was easily accessible. The Famicom audience largely consisted of children, so the games needed to be easy to play and understand. Earlier RPGs had a reputation for being extraordinarily difficult, often giving you no guidance or easily putting you in an unwinnable situation. *Dragon Quest* was much friendlier, giving you some direction into and context for the game world. It was even generous about player death, resurrecting you at the starting point, letting you keep your experience and equipment, and only charging you half of your gold. A strategy guide was helpful, but not necessary. Further, the Famicom controller only had four buttons and a directional pad, so the controls needed to be simple and straightforward, compared to the complex keyboard commands required by computer RPGs. Combined with artwork by famed manga illustrator Akira Toriyama, who was seeing incredible success with *Dragon Ball*, and the game became the reference point for generations' worth of RPGs.

There were many direct clones in the mid to late '80s, and most have been forgotten. Other companies jumped on the RPG bandwagon but still crafted their own unique experiences – of this era, *Final Fantasy* and *Megami Tensei* were the most popular, and both remain internationally successful to this day.

However, there is more to a JRPG than approachability. The game style evolved from the 8-bit Famicom onto the 16-bit platforms, and then the 32-bit CD systems. Broadly speaking, elements include: an overworld that is divided into discrete town and dungeon sections; separate screens where battles take place, typically turn-based and executed via menu commands; a focus on battle statistics in lieu of other RPG elements (e.g. charisma statistics to influence conversation); unique character customisation systems; manga-style artwork; strong soundtracks, as seen in other console games; and linear storylines.

Obviously, even at the time, there were exceptions to these rules. Square's *Final Fantasy* used artwork by Yoshitaka Amano, whose illustrations are a far cry from typical manga (though Tetsuya Nomura, who joined the series as an illustrator with the seventh instalment, is a little more standard). Data East's *Metal Max* presented an open world that let the player explore at their leisure. Atlus' *Megami Tensei* (and its 16-bit sequel series, *Shin Megami Tensei*) kept the first-person perspective found in *Wizardry*. Namco's *Tales of Phantasia* used an action-based battle system even though the rest of the systems were similar to other games. RPGs grew to be so popular in Japan that there was quite a bit of experimentation, and this created an audience with a wide variety of tastes, though America and Europe only saw glimpses of this in the 16-bit era since (for the most part) only the most mainstream games were localised.

While this type of game is what most people think of when referring to a JRPG, the net is quite a bit wider. While *Dragon Quest* had turn-based, menu-based battle sequences, it certainly wasn't the only popular game to feature them. RPGs from as early as 1984, like Nihon Falcom's *Dragon Slayer* and T&E Soft's *Hydlide*, focused almost entirely on action, though they were often clumsy, as combat often consisted of bumping into enemies and hoping you had the stats to beat them.



Left-to-right, top-to-bottom, some of the most important Japanese role-playing games: Falcom's *Dragon Slayer*, XtalSoft's *Mugen no Shinzou*, Namco's *The Tower of Druaga*, and T&E Soft's *Hydlide*.

The flashpoint for this evolution, once again a Famicom game, was Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda*. Like *Dragon Quest*, it was relatively easy to understand and play, and moreover, had much better controls and combat than previous computer RPGs.

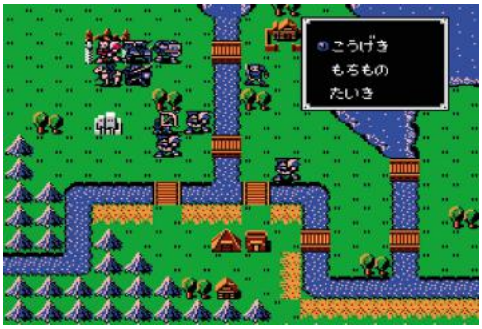
Ironically, the *Zelda* series is not really considered an RPG by most modern gamers, and that's mostly because so many of its elements are either simplified or abstracted. In the original *Legend of Zelda*, there are only a few pieces of equipment, with most items used to open new areas or solve puzzles, and the only permanent character growth comes from expanding your life meter. Its sequel, *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*, is a little more complex, having an experience system, several magic spells, and other statistics, though later games reeled these back. That being said, by the definitions we're setting down, *Zelda* is indeed technically a JRPG ... but only barely.

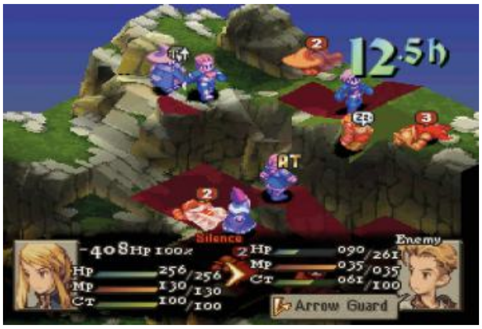
Partially, this is because RPG elements began cropping up in all kinds of other games. For example, the famous Metroidvania sub-genre, which grew into existence with *Super Metroid* and *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, are basically *Zelda* games with a side-scrolling perspective (and *Metroid*, as with *Zelda*, also heavily abstracts the statistical elements).

Even these are only a portion of what could be considered a Japanese RPG. There are strategy RPGs (or rather simulation RPGs, as they tend to be referred to in Japan), where units of opposing teams are put on square (or hex) boards and must move to attack each other. This style of game has its roots in the PC game *Daisenryaku*, which in turn was based on the sort of war games you'd see from developers like SSI. Nintendo's *Fire Emblem* for the Famicom was the first big entry to establish the simulation RPG, as it gave your units individual personalities, presented them in a grand storyline, gave them statistics, and let them grow over the course of the game. Later games include Quest's *Tactics Ogre* (and its own sorta-sequel, *Final Fantasy Tactics*), Square's *Front Mission*, SEGA's *Shining Force*, *Sakura Wars*, *Valkyria Chronicles*, and many others.

Then there are the Rogue-likes. *Rogue* was a dungeon crawler with randomly-generated levels, dating from the early '80s, which was widely ignored outside of the most hardcore PC circles. In Japan, Chunsoft's *Mystery Dungeon* series, beginning on the Super Famicom, created a new, then-unique variation of this game. The first entry here was a tie-in with *Dragon Quest*, featuring Torneko from the fourth game. Much like its parent series, it took this style and made it approachable for broader audiences. Over the decades, other licences have been plugged into the *Mystery Dungeon* style, including *Final Fantasy*, *Pokémon*, and Chunsoft's own original character, Shiren.

Then there are the first-person dungeon crawlers. While games like *Wizardry* eventually fell out of style with '90s PC gamers, they maintained some niche level of popularity in Japan, where the licence actually continued for many years. Atlus' 2007 DS game *Etrian Odyssey* resurrected this style of game for a new generation, with bright visuals, attractive characters, and perhaps most importantly, mapping tools on the bottom screen of the console. This sparked another revolution, with similar games also being developed by others.





Nintendo and Intelligent Systems brought fantasy strategy role-playing to the Famicom with *Fire Emblem* (left), which has become an international success. Square's *Final Fantasy Tactics* (right) is another take on this formula, using an isometric perspective.

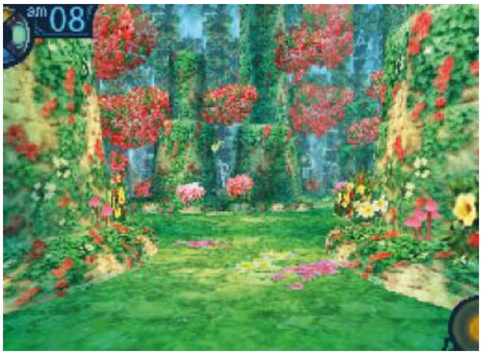
And the list goes on and on. There are MMORPGs like *Phantasy Star Online* and *Final Fantasy XIV*. There are monster-collecting RPGs, starting with the *Pokémon* craze. There are *Souls*-like games, a particular brand of action RPG begun by FromSoftware's *Demon's Souls*, which emphasise a high level of difficulty. There's a unique branch of Japanese arcade RPGs, like Namco's *Tower of Druaga*. Many action games, particularly in the PlayStation 2 era, with games like *Devil May Cry*, also started offering character customisation, though since the focus is more on the action elements, it usually isn't considered an RPG.

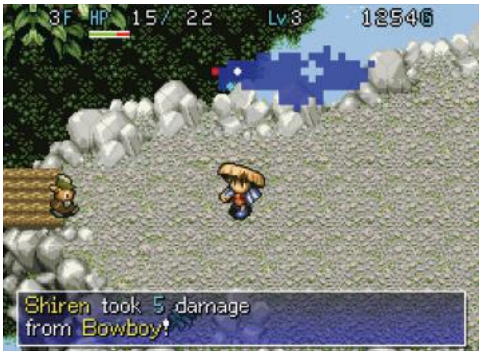
So now that we've defined (broadly) what a JRPG is, where did the term actually come from? Searches of old Usenet forums from the mid-'90s show the term popping up every now and again, but it really didn't come into popular usage until the PlayStation 2 generation, around the year 2000. At this point, there was a distinction between games like *Final Fantasy*, which grew from consoles, and *Fallout* and *Diablo*, which were franchises that started on PCs. Some gamers referred to these as "console RPGs" versus "computer RPGs", which made sense, but made for some confusion since the acronyms were identical. As more traditionally computer RPGs began to make their way onto console systems, like Bioware's *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* for the Xbox, the audience began to settle on "JRPG" for the Japanese type, and "WRPG" (Western RPG, obviously) for American and European types. By this point, these sub-genres of games catered to wildly different audiences, hence the need for a different designation.

However, genres evolve, and what made sense during a certain era may not always hold true. Popular games like *Final Fantasy XV* have barely any resemblance to a traditional JRPG, having rather more in common with open world WRPGs like *The Witcher 3*, though there is still a distinct stylistic difference. Similarly, Capcom's *Dragon's Dogma* comes from a Japanese developer, but has more in common in looks and style with Western RPGs. There are plenty of turn-of-century Western-developed RPGs like *Anachronox*, *Septerra Core*, and *Shadow Madness* that are heavily inspired by Japanese games, while there are tons of Western indie RPGs, perhaps most popularly *Undertale*, which draw from similar sources. At this point, "JRPG" is far more a style than simply an RPG that came from Japan.

So, like a lot of sub-genre labels, a "JRPG" designation isn't really binary, so much as a sliding scale. There are also hundreds upon hundreds of them. Obviously, we can't cover all of these because then you'd have a book nobody would be able to carry, but this book does cover all of the major and important ones, so you can get a feel for the variety and richness of what these games can offer.

While the genre isn't quite as prolific as it was back in the '80s and '90s, Japanese RPGs are still an essential part of the vibrant video-game landscape. They still provide unique mechanics, distinct visual styles, brilliant soundtracks, innovative stories, and other aspects that make them stand apart from their Western-developed counterparts.





Shiren took 5 damage from Bowboy!

***Etrian Odyssey* (left) resurrected the old-school first-person dungeon crawler, featuring attractive visuals and a touch screen mapping system. *Mystery Dungeon: Shiren the Wanderer* (right) is a distinctly Japanese branch of the Rogue-like sub-genre.**

A History of RPGs in Japan

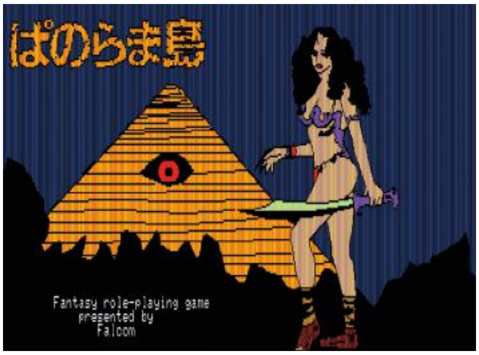
The ’80s Computer era

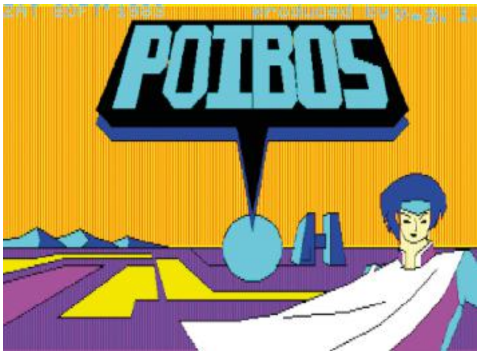
The personal computer industry as we know it today was born out of American companies like Apple and IBM. As such, most computers in Japan were imported from the United States, many being the Apple II, and most of the early games they played were in English. In late 1981, the electronics company NEC created the PC-6001 line of computers, one of the first solely for the Japanese market, and with it, up sprung a gaming industry in support.

At this early point in the industry’s development, the “role-playing game” classification was not widely understood. Even in the Western industry, games were generally classified as either “arcade” games, which were action and reflex-oriented, or “adventure” games, which were longer, more complex, and typically required more patience. As such, it’s very difficult to determine what the first “role-playing game” actually is. Arguably the first games that could qualify came from Koei, and were termed “simulations”. Many of these titles let the player input various statistics – things like health or stamina – then placed them in various scenarios, which were influenced by random factors. Since the concept of numbers and virtual dice rolls is basically the same as how tabletop games like *Dungeons and Dragons* work, in retrospect, these can be called “role-playing games”. The actual term “RPG” was eventually used to advertise Koei titles like *Khufu-Ou no Himitsu*, which were too slow to be “arcade” games but too focused on action to be a “simulation”.

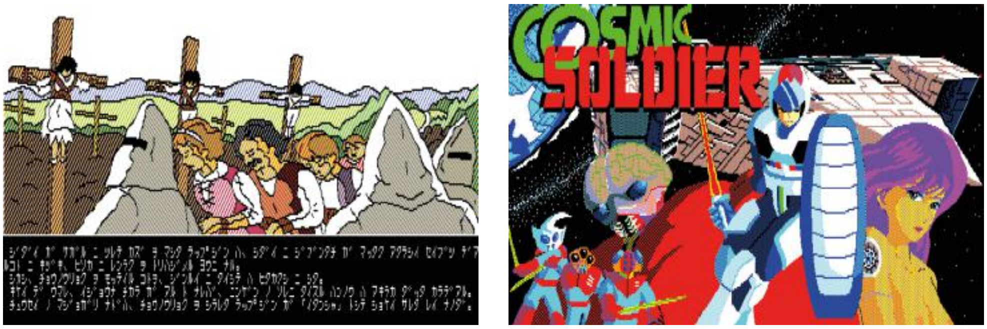
Western titles like *Wizardry* and *Ultima* were reasonably popular with hardcore Japanese game players, so some early attempts at Japanese RPGs were based on these games, to varying extents. Indeed, many early PC games could be considered conceptually identical to the kind of games being published in America, just in a different language. There were a few key disparities, though. Firstly, Japan had a small adult software industry. In the United States, retailers typically wouldn’t stock adult software for fear of being labelled as pornography dealers. At the time, there was even concern from Sierra Online that relatively tame titles like *Leisure Suit Larry*, which had an adult sense of humour but little of the way of actual sex or nudity, would not be carried by national chains. (They were proven wrong, at least.) Japan didn’t stigmatise such titles, and without any central regulation, the 18+ cottage industry could flourish. Many early titles were strip games or text adventures, but again Koei created some unique titles like *Danchizuma no Yuuwaku*, where you played a door-to-door condom salesman with the ulterior motive of bedding any of the women you’d meet.

The other primary difference between the markets had to do with the Japanese computer





The title screens for early PC games, such as Falcom’s *Panorama Tou* and Zat Soft’s *Poibos*, pictured here, were often fancier than the in-game graphics.



PC games were aimed at adults, which meant they could have darker themes, as seen in Hot-B's *Psychic City* (left) or simply include gratuitous nudity, as in Kogado's *Cosmic Soldier* (right).

scene being connected with otaku culture – that is, extreme fans of anime and manga. Again, if you look at early computer titles like *Dragon Slayer* or *Xanadu*, they use the same Western-type fantasy artwork you'd find in an American store, but eventually game characters were patterned after the wide-eyed heroes and heroines with multi-coloured hair that typified popular Japanese media in games like *Romancia*, giving them a clearly defined sense of style.

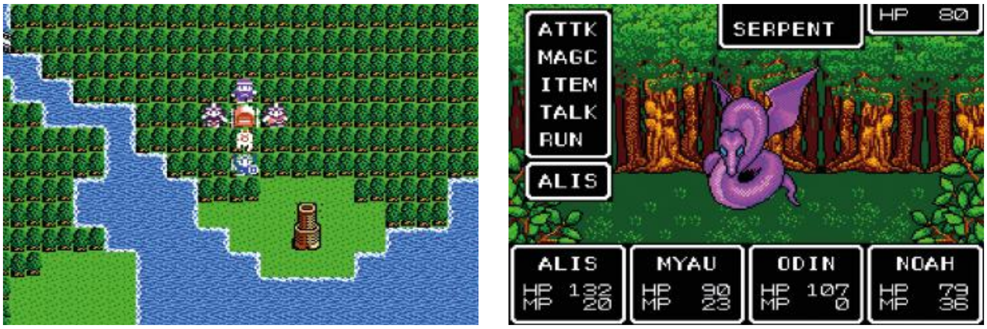
Amidst all of this, there are three pillars of the Japanese PC RPG scene that influenced the industry as we know it today. One is *Dragon Slayer*, published in 1984 by Falcom and designed by Yoshio Kiya. It is an incredibly difficult dungeon crawler, in which you explore a maze looking for enough resources to beat the impossibly powerful dragon hidden with its depths. On its own it wasn't a massive success, but it was the predecessor of *Xanadu*, published the next year and also designed by Kiya. This game was so challenging, and so obtuse, that basically, a strategy guide was required to see it to the end. This is true of many games of the era, but *Xanadu* was also easily the most popular, following its appearance as the focus of many magazine articles. This type of game established the hardcore RPG player, who would pore over strategy guides like they were forbidden lore, and trade hints with other like-minded players.

Another pillar was *Mugen no Shinzou*, designed by Kazunari Tomi and initially published by XtalSoft in 1984. It plays very similarly to *Ultima*, in that you explore a large game world, but it uses a turn-based battle system similar to that in *Wizardry*, complete with large portraits that show the enemy you're fighting. Even though it's a collection of concepts from other titles, it proved to be a winning formula, because that exact same template was used later in Enix's *Dragon Quest*, the title that defines the Japanese RPG as it's understood today.

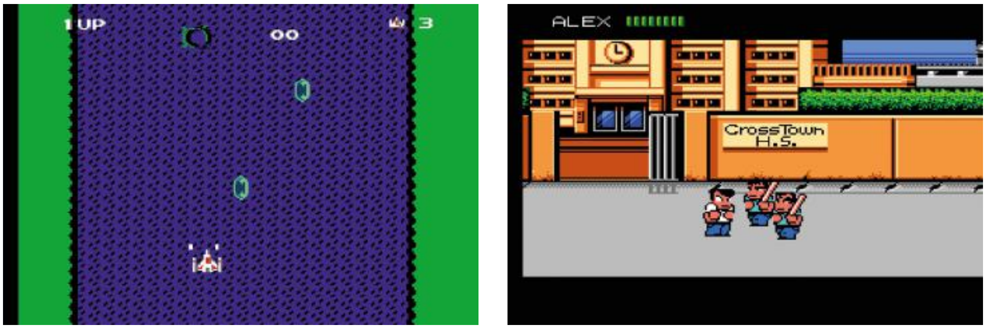
The third pillar is *Hydlide*, published in 1984 by T&E Soft and developed by Tokihiro Naitou. This is an action RPG, in which you control a hero marching across an overworld, defeating monsters and occasionally diving through dungeons. It's not the first of its type – on the surface, *Dragon Slayer* is similar – but it was more user friendly than Falcom's titles, and had the appeal of an arcade-style action title while still wearing RPG clothing. *Hydlide* set down the formula used in Falcom's *Ys*, but perhaps more importantly, Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda*. Incidentally, *Hydlide* is also the only of these three that was released in English, but it didn't come out until its 1989 Nintendo Entertainment System release, at which point it was massively outdated.

The 8-Bit era

The first RPG on the Famicom was technically a 1985 game called *Zunou Senkan Galg*, which proclaimed itself a "scroll-RPG" on the box, whatever that meant. In practice, it was a vertical shoot-'em-up similar to the popular *Star Force*, except there was level branching, and you needed to play levels over a few times to collect a certain number of ship parts. Despite the label, most people have agreed this isn't really a role-playing game, but it shows that no one really understood what the label meant, even if it could be used for marketing purposes.



Dragon Warrior/ Quest IV **(left) and** ***Phantasy Star*** **(right) are two of the best RPGs of the 8-bit console era.**



During the 8-bit console era, developers were trying different things with RPGs. There's the self-proclaimed "scroll-RPG" *Galg* (left), a shoot-'em-up where you hunt for ship parts, and *River City Ransom* (right), a beat-'em-up which lets you upgrade your character's stats and moveset.

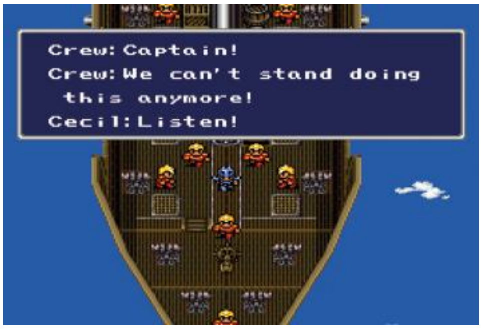
Of course, the defining RPG of this era was *Dragon Quest*. One of the main rules of business, regardless of the industry, is to find what's popular and copy it. When discussing Japanese RPGs, that's what happened with *Dragon Quest* and the many, many imitators it spawned for the Famicom. Many copied its basic aesthetic, battle system, and interface as well, because, if it works, why mess with it? To be fair though, of these numerous clones, most of them tried to include something original to differentiate themselves, like the light-hearted tone of Hudson's *Momotarou Densetsu*.

There were games that were more ambitious, that adhered to the basics set down by *Dragon Quest* while still providing something new and original. Titles like SEGA's *Phantasy Star* and Square's *Final Fantasy* provided more advanced visuals and somewhat more elaborate storylines, and later games like Capcom's *Sweet Home* drastically reworked the template into a horror game. With the style of game becoming so popular so quickly, there were games that tried to subvert its tropes – *Metal Max* offered a wide-open world to explore, focused on hunting down monsters rather than following a trail from town to town, while *LaSalle Ishii no Child's Quest* replaced the typical band of heroes with a child talent group. Perhaps the most popular of these was Nintendo's *Mother*, later known internationally as *EarthBound*, which presented a quirky take on Americana under attack from an alien menace. Amusingly, NES ports of *Ultima III* and *IV*, published by Pony Canyon in Japan, were remade for the Famicom to more closely resemble *Dragon Quest*. The exceptions to the *Dragon Quest* rule were *Wizardry*, which received a Famicom port courtesy of ASCII, and Atlus' *Megami Tensei*, itself patterned after *Wizardry*. Both were first-person dungeon crawlers, quite different from *Dragon Quest* and its peers, but still popular with RPG players. RPG elements were also beginning to pop up in other genres, most notably Technos' *River City Ransom*, a beat-'em-up that's a quasi-sequel to the arcade game *Renegade*. While it plays similarly to its predecessor, fallen enemies will drop coins, which can be used at shops to heal yourself, increase your stats, or gain new abilities. It's also one of the few of its type that let you save and resume progress via a password system.

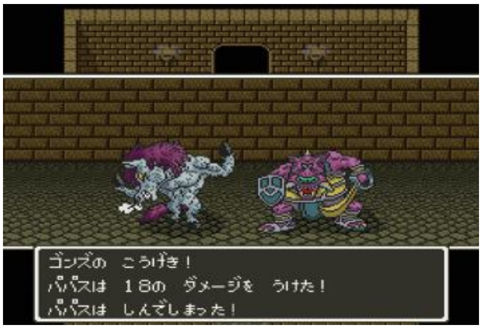
At the time, in the United States, the common belief was that video games, being aimed at adolescent boys, should be mostly action games. Meanwhile in Japan, RPGs were viewed as games that everyone could play, because while they required a big time investment, they also didn't require reflexes, so they had a comparatively low barrier of entry. Your mother, for example, may have become frustrated if she kept running into those Goombas in *Super Mario Bros.*, because she hadn't quite figured out the controller yet, but beating up slimes in *Dragon Quest* was a little easier, since all she had to do was select the "attack" command. While RPGs of the era were often difficult, at least by modern standards, there wasn't any hurdle that couldn't be overcome by either grinding or reading a strategy guide. Nintendo was able to successfully market *The Legend of Zelda*, one of the premier RPGs at the time to North American gamers, but it also took off because, at its core, it's still an action game. They had somewhat less success with *Dragon Warrior* (the American title of the original *Dragon Quest*) and *Final Fantasy*, as these were turn-based RPGs and didn't quite have the same wide appeal. It took a bit longer before they were able to sell American console gamers on the concept of an RPG.

It's also important to understand the limitations of the console platform. While the Famicom was initially designed for single-screen arcade games like *Donkey Kong*, game developers were aware of the desire for longer, more complex titles. However, one of the big issues in the early days of the concept was the question of how to save your progress. Early Famicom cartridges used ROMs, which could not record any additional data. In consequence, games used cumbersome passwords to record your game, with more complex titles containing even longer passwords. If you wrote down a single character incorrectly, your entire progress could disappear. The Famicom Disk System solved this by using rewritable disks, providing something closer to the home computers of the time. Indeed, *The Legend of Zelda* was a launch title for the platform in 1986.

However, the system ran into numerous problems – not only was piracy rampant, but most of the technical benefits provided by the Disk System quickly became obsolete, as ROM size



Crew: Captain!
Crew: We can't stand doing
this anymore!
Cecil: Listen!



ゴンズの こうげき！
パパスは 18の ダメージを うけた！
パパスは しんでしまった！

16-bit games offered more complex storytelling, as seen in *Final Fantasy II/IV* (left), where hero Cecil questions unethical orders from his king, and *Dragon Quest V* (right), where the protagonist witnesses the death of his father.

expanded what disks could hold, creating more graphically-enticing games. Nintendo also created a method that allowed cartridges to properly save games. In short, data cannot be written to ROM (it stands for Read Only Memory, after all) but it can be written to the RAM (Random Access Memory). The problem had been that data disappears from RAM once the power is shut off, which was solved by including a lithium battery in the cartridge to provide a little power, keeping the RAM active. This feature was used in the NES version of *The Legend of Zelda*, and in most RPGs on the platform. With its major benefits obsolete, and the platform becoming riddled with cheaply developed junk, the Famicom Disk System was abandoned within a few years.

The 16-Bit era

The next generation of games began in 1987 with NEC's PC Engine, which had an 8-bit CPU, as with the Famicom, but used a more powerful 16-bit graphic processor for nicer visuals. This was followed up the next year by the SEGA Mega Drive, a follow-up to the SEGA Mark III/Master System, which had floundered in Japan. In 1989, both were brought out in North America, renamed the TurboGrafx-16 and the Genesis, respectively. In 1991, Nintendo released its 16-bit competitor, known as the Super Famicom in Japan and the Super Nintendo Entertainment System elsewhere.

Early 16-bit RPGs were basically 8-bit RPGs with slightly nicer graphics, but adhering to the same design templates. Some examples of these include Hudson's *Necromancer* and SEGA's *Phantasy Star II*. However, one of the main improvements of this era was the expansion of cartridge ROM sizes. Early games weren't much bigger than Famicom titles, which mostly topped out at four megabits (or half a megabyte); as the generation went on and ROMs decreased in price, their size increased drastically, with later releases like *Chrono Trigger* clocking in at 32 megabits (or 4 megabytes). Part of this was to allow for fancier graphics and visual effects. But, perhaps more importantly, there was now room for larger scripts. Early games tended to have an opening text scroll and an ending, with the story delivered mostly through characters you talked to in towns. Much of this was due to size limitations, which meant the storytelling had to be brief. With that extra space, characters were injected with more personality, and storylines became more complex, not to mention that the worlds they inhabited became more varied. The focus was beginning to become less about traditional RPG aspects – exploration and level raising – and more about guiding your characters through a story. These types of games had a broader appeal, so their difficulty level was often lower. But that didn't mean that every type of RPG out there focused entirely on storytelling. There was still a big audience that had cut its teeth on the more difficult titles of the earlier generations; they were catered to with more mechanically complex titles like *Romancing SaGa*.

NEC also unveiled a CD-ROM attachment for its PC Engine in 1988, being at the forefront of technology. A CD could hold about 650 megabytes of data, an absolutely massive amount compared to ROM cartridges. Graphics and script sizes were no longer of concern at that scale; the extra space was typically used for cutscenes, voice acting, and music. The visuals in these cinematic elements were quite simple compared to those in later games – typically, some stills with a limited amount of animation, nothing compared to what was seen in TV or film animation – but they were still much more impressive than what could be found on cartridge games. Publishers often sprung for famous voice actors known for their work in anime production, giving video games an extra sense of legitimacy ... though it also tended to chew through their budgets and result in games lacking in other, more important areas.

Strategy RPGs also became more popular – the style of game was established with Nintendo's *Fire Emblem* in 1990, and its continuation on the Famicom. Meanwhile, SEGA's *Shining Force* proved to be a slightly less hardcore variation meant for Mega Drive/Genesis gamers (and was one of the few of its kind localised into English) while Square's *Front Mission* and Enix/Quest's *Tactics Ogre* were hugely influential over later games. Nintendo also continued *The Legend of Zelda* series with *A Link to the Past*, while titles like Square's *Secret of Mana*, Falcom's *Ys IV* and Quintet's Heaven and Earth trilogy (*Soul Blazer*, *Illusion of Gaia*, and *Terranigma*) refined the action RPG concept.

Grahf
"I am Grahf, the seeker
of power. Doth thou
desire the power?"

The 32-bit era brought along plenty of fancy cutscenes, as seen in *Final Fantasy VII* (left) but also even deeper stories, as in sci-fi mecha RPG *Xenogears* (right).

On the English-speaking side, publishers still struggled to introduce American and European gamers to Japanese RPGs. Game localisation was spotty, but most of those chosen were decent enough to garner a faithful audience – Square continued the *Final Fantasy* line with the fourth and sixth game, renaming them *Final Fantasy II* and *Final Fantasy III* (the fifth game was skipped entirely), SEGA localised its Mega Drive/Genesis *Phantasy Star* titles, Capcom brought over its *Breath of Fire* series, and smaller companies, like Natsume, licensed titles like *Lufia*. Unfortunately, *Dragon Quest/Warrior* took a break from the English speaking world during the 16-bit era. Despite this, there were still dozens of games, many of excellent quality, like *Seiken Densetsu 3*, that remained Japan-only.

The PC Engine CD was released in North America as the TurboGrafx-16 CD, but, outside of the port of Falcom's *Ys Book I & II*, failed to make much of an impact. The SEGA CD made its way internationally, with its flagship RPG *Lunar: The Silver Star*, which actually found a decent fanbase in spite of a limited audience. But for the most part, very few of these CD-ROM RPGs were released outside of Japan, as American publishers opted to use the promise of full-motion video to appeal to gamers, something that proved to be a fad relegated to the mid-'90s.

The 32-bit era

From an international standpoint, the PlayStation generation is one of the most important in the Japanese RPG genre. And the most important game was, undoubtedly, *Final Fantasy VII*. From a design standpoint, it wasn't drastically different from its predecessors, but it did feature numerous computer-rendered full-motion video cutscenes, as well as impressive 3D graphics during gameplay, which showed off the full power of Sony's system. All of those videos also meant that the seemingly endless storage space of the CD-ROM was exhausted, as *Final Fantasy VII* was released on three whole discs. It was, of course, a massive success in Japan, but it finally penetrated the overseas markets as well.

The common perception was that Americans liked action games ... so what better way to sell them something than to advertise it as an action game, even if it wasn't? *Final Fantasy VII* received a television commercial campaign, quite rare for the time, which focused almost entirely on its dramatic computer-rendered cutscenes. These weren't representative of how the game actually looked during gameplay, but it didn't matter – it sure looked cool. That was how Square was able to convince Americans to try out *Final Fantasy VII*, essentially by tricking them. But almost no one seemed to mind, as the game became a critical and commercial success, as well as a cultural phenomenon. Japanese RPGs had finally hit the international mainstream.

With that foot firmly in the door, the localisation of many similar titles could go ahead. Square had already barrelled ahead, bringing us two more *Final Fantasy* games, the brainy sci-fi mecha game *Xenogears*, the cinematic horror game *Parasite Eve*, and the oddball parallel-dimension-hopping *Chrono Cross*. Along with those was more eccentric fare like *SaGa Frontier*, a follow-up to the obscure cult hit (and previously Japan-only) *Romancing SaGa* series, and *Vagrant Story*, a mechanically complex dungeon crawler. Sony was reluctant to focus too much on RPGs, as their early offerings in Japan (*Arc the Lad* and *Popolocrois*) weren't all that graphically impressive, but they did begin their *Wild Arms* franchise, focusing on an anime-style reimagination of the American Wild West. Many other third-party companies localised their titles as well, ensuring a constant stream of releases for the new, JRPG-hungry audience.

As for the type of games being produced, again, many chose to follow the leader and base themselves around the *Final Fantasy* template. That meant lots of cutscenes, typically spread across two or more CDs, either using computer-rendered visuals or more traditional anime cutscenes. This wasn't necessarily true for some of the other franchises, who didn't quite have the budget to compete, improving their 16-bit games in other ways. Either way, all these games trended more towards longer, story-driven experiences. For example, *Dragon Quest V* on the Super Famicom takes about 20 hours to beat, while *Dragon Quest VII* for the PlayStation easily takes over 100. That's an extreme example, but the playing time of 32-bit RPGs was often quite a bit longer than before, for better or worse.

***Final Fantasy X* (left) for the PlayStation 2 moved the series closer to being an interactive movie, while the haunting *Shin Megami Tensei* series finally made its official English language debut with the third game, subtitled *Nocturne* (right).**

Strategy RPGs became more popular, largely thanks to *Final Fantasy Tactics*, with games like this, such as *Front Mission 3* and *Hoshigami*, seeing release in North America. However, the type of action RPG that was popular in the 16-bit era largely fell out of favour, with the exception of a few early Saturn games like *Magic Knight Rayearth*. Action games in general were moving towards 3D, with the standout being Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time* for the Nintendo 64, so that became the benchmark for other games to follow, if they followed them at all. Dungeon crawlers had largely died out.

Interestingly, during much of this generation, most RPG developers were still reticent to use voice acting. Almost none of the Square games of the era featured any of it (save for the humorous action RPG *Brave Fencer Musashi*), and only a handful of games, like Game Arts' *Grandia*, featured it at all.

The PlayStation 2/Game Boy Advance era

The PlayStation 2 era moved the genres more into cinematics. The greatly enhanced hardware meant that static 2D backgrounds were mostly discarded in favour of fully 3D environments; characters could be much more realistically rendered, and animated as well. This led, of course, to even more video, particularly as seen in Square's *Final Fantasy X* and Monolith's *Xenosaga* series. Dialogue in this type of game could no longer be pantomimed either, so it was provided by voice actors. By this point, the dubbing quality was improving, so it was no longer as painful as in the old days.

Many more titles were also chosen for localisation. *Shin Megami Tensei* finally had a release in English, as did its many spinoffs, including the breakout hit *Persona 3*. Nippon Ichi, a small company specialising in quirky strategy-RPGs, also saw some hits with games like *Disgaea*. Franchises that were successful in the 32-bit era continued onward, like *Grandia* and *Suikoden*.

Meanwhile, Nintendo also unveiled the Game Boy Advance, with hardware quality roughly on a level with the Super Nintendo. As RPGs go, there wasn't much original content – there were ports of SNES games like *Breath of Fire*, and new entries in the *Pokémon* series. There was, however, Camelot's *Golden Sun*, which was flashy and impressive, as well as follow-ups to well regarded SRPGs like *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance*, reorienting their gameplay to the portable format and making them more suitable for a younger audience. This also marked the first platform on which *Fire Emblem* would be released on in English.

The HD era

The high-definition consoles – the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3 – proved to be an issue for Japanese developers, owing to outdated practices. There were a number of reasons for this, but a big one was that they were not used to using middleware graphics engine, instead creating their own in-house engines for each game. This may be have been workable in previous years, but the increased budget and manpower necessary to develop high-definition games made it far more difficult; meanwhile, Western developers were more comfortable working with other third-party engines, particularly the Unreal Engine, which was popular during this era. As a result, Western games flourished on these platforms while Japanese games suffered.

This was only in broad terms, though – there were still plenty of Japanese games, particularly at the beginning of the generation. The Xbox was a failure in Japan, and Microsoft was keen to make a better effort for the Xbox 360, courting many Japanese developers so they made titles aimed at their own market. They were prolific early on, with titles like Mistwalker's *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey*, and Namco's *Tales of Vesperia*. However, this push only lasted a few years, as the PlayStation 3 eventually caught up, and Japanese games returned to Sony's home. The Nintendo Wii was not high definition, and thereby cheaper to develop for, but while the system had a large install base, it was primarily casual gamers, with role-playing fans preferring more powerful consoles; therefore, the number of RPGs released on the system ended up being pretty small. However, near the end of the system's life cycle, Nintendo published a number of high-quality RPGs, including *Xenoblade Chronicles*, *The Last Story*, and *Pandora's Tower*. Unfortunately, none were scheduled for English release. This prompted a fan campaign called Operation Rainfall, comparing the lack of games to a waterless desert, and requesting that these games see international release. Nintendo of Europe eventually localised these titles, which soon came out in North America as well.

1200
Investigation
17
CASHIER
Earn 50,000 coins
Play the dice game to earn coins
Members Floor Lobby

The long-awaited *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (left) and *Persona 5* (right) are two of the most popular JRPGs in recent years.

Due to the ballooning costs of console development, most Japanese developers instead concentrated on portable platforms, which at this point were the Nintendo DS and Sony PlayStation Portable (PSP). This was particularly evident with *Dragon Quest IX* – typically, the latest *Dragon Quest* was published on the most popular system, which in this case, in Japan, happened to be the DS. From a technical standpoint, this also meant that these games were closer to their PlayStation or Nintendo 64 versions. Generally speaking, the quality of many of these games was often middling, attempting to reach the heights of previous generations but never quite getting there. The biggest example of this was Imageepoch, a company specialising in RPGs that proclaimed they would save the genre, but their titles were rarely well-reviewed (some were terrible) and never really all that popular. It didn't help that portable consoles in the West were often seen as primarily for kids; rampant piracy on both platforms also meant that some publishers just didn't bother to localise many of their games.

Western RPGs were also beginning to find their footing on consoles. Previously these games were focused primarily on the computer market, but games like BioWare's *Mass Effect* and Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* proved to be hugely successfully, primarily because they were created with both accessibility and mass appeal. In some ways, this was the same thing *Dragon Quest* had done on the Famicom 20 years prior. During this time, gamers began to compare these cinematic, sprawling, big budget Western RPGs to their Japanese counterparts ... and the Japanese games ended up coming off lacking, especially thanks to tepidly received games like *Final Fantasy XIII*. Some were eager to claim that the "JRPG was dead". This wasn't actually true – genres don't really die, they just rest – but it was clear they were on the downturn.

That's not say there weren't some great games, though. *The World Ends With You*, a stylish RPG from Square for the DS, was wildly innovative, and SEGA's *Valkyria Chronicles* proved to be a strategy-RPG cult classic. *Xenoblade* didn't make an appearance until near the end of the Wii's life, but it's easily one of the best of the era. FromSoftware's *Demon's Souls* was a surprise hit, and their follow-up series *Dark Souls* became an international success. While all these games were wildly different from what one would normally consider to be Japanese RPGs, their demanding difficulty levels made them a preferable alternative to the cinematic games coming from Western developers at the time, which prioritised the "experience" over gameplay, and were made approachable so anyone could beat them. First-person dungeon crawlers also saw a resurgence on the Nintendo DS, thanks to Atlus' *Etrian Odyssey*.

The modern era

Things began to pick up for the Japanese scene, though. The next generation of portable consoles, the Nintendo 3DS and Sony PlayStation Vita, strengthened the hardware, putting them closer to the PlayStation 2, even adding improvements like analogue controls that made them easy to play. The quality of the games improved as well, with the return of the *Shin Megami Tensei* series via its fourth entry, as well as the new *Bravely Default* from Square, a stirring tribute to *Final Fantasy*'s 16-bit titles.

The next generation of consoles – the PlayStation 4, the Xbox One, and Nintendo Wii U (and shortly after that system's failure, the Switch) saw a resurgence in Japanese games, particularly RPGs. This was simply down to increased experience with the hardware. While the games still often look lower budget than Western AAA games, they still manage to look stylish, with surprise hits like *Nier Automata*. The *Yakuza* games, popular in Japan since the PlayStation 2 era but long floundering in the West, also exploded in international popularity, largely thanks to stronger localisation efforts and marketing. Atlus' *Persona* series was already picking up steam, with the long-awaited fifth game becoming a massive hit among English-speaking fans. The era of portable-only platforms had also come to an end, with Sony bowing out after the Vita, and Nintendo making a hybrid portable/TV console with the Switch, so the line between the markets was basically gone.

While Japanese RPGs are perhaps not as abundant as they were back in the '90s or early 2000s, and the market has seen its ups and downs, that's certainly no indicator of low quality. Even though Western games like *The Witcher 3* still get rave reviews, Japanese RPGs are still unique in ways that make them stand out from their Western counterparts, making them an essential part of the gaming landscape.

Localisation

When it comes to language translation, video games have a number of issues that make it significantly more difficult than in other mediums. For books, you just write new text; for movies, you just subtitle or dub over the voices. Altering text in video games is substantially more complicated because they require skilled programmers to replace the text. Ideally, these should be the same staff that implemented the Japanese text in the first place, but situations are rarely ideal, and this was quite a difficult task, particularly in the 8- and 16-bit days.

To understand these issues requires some basic knowledge of the Japanese language. Japanese is remarkably compact, one of the main reasons being that its phonetic symbols represent syllables rather than individual letters. "Pokémon", for example, is seven English letters, but is spelled in four characters in Japanese. For quite a long time, Japanese games were made primarily with the Japanese audience in mind, with other languages being a distant secondary concern, so only enough space for Japanese words was made. Thus in the in-game menus, "Pokémon" is often abbreviated to "Pkmn". This applied to character names too – many Japanese names fit within four characters, so that was the space provided. For example, the hero of *Chrono Trigger* is supposed to be named "Chrono", which consists of three characters in Japanese. However, the game limited this spot to five characters, so when it was localised in English, it had to be truncated to "Crono", which sounds the same but looks pretty weird. There are scores of examples like this in early video games.

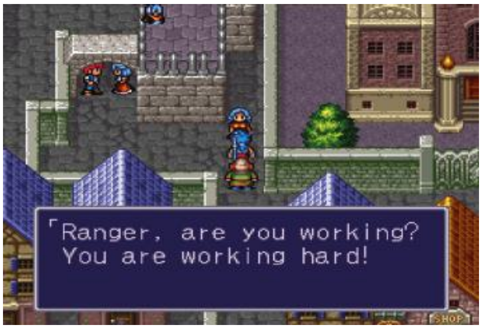
The obvious solution to this problem should be "just add more space" and of course the reasons why not are complex, and require some technical knowledge. Text display in computers is typically handled with 8-bit (or single byte) integers, which can hold up to 256 values, each correlating to a letter or symbol (0 = "a", 1 = "b", 2 = "c" and so forth). Both upper and lower case letters (26 in each case) in the English alphabet, as well as punctuation marks and assorted accented characters easily fit into the 256 character limit. Japanese uses three syllabaries, two of which – hiragana and katakana – are phonetic. There are 46 characters in each, and together, these also easily fit into the 256 character limit. Japanese can be written entirely using either (or both) of these syllabaries, and early games often used only them, but they can be difficult to read, even for native Japanese speakers.

The third syllabary contains the more complicated kanji characters based on Chinese – there are thousands of kanji, with a bare minimum of about two thousand required for basic reading comprehension. Despite the large number of these, they provide structure and meaning to Japanese sentences and make them quicker to comprehend. The problem here is obvious though – there is no way to fit all of these kanji into an 8-bit integer. Early games may have limited the number to a hundred or so to fit under the limit, but that's barely anything. And so, when more complex games began using kanji, the text engine was changed to use 16-bit (or double byte) integers, which can hold 65536 values.

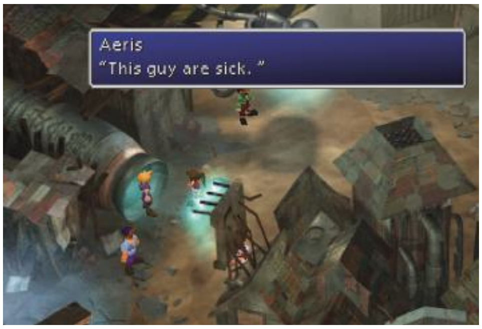
However, an issue arose with English, as double byte integers were a massive waste of space. Sentences written in English would take up substantially more ROM space than sentences in Japanese. Considering that ROM space was at a premium, this meant that there just wasn't enough space for a proper English translation. Of course, this issue would be resolved if the text engine were rewritten to use single byte characters, but the effort required was often too great for the programmers, resulting in a more straightforward solution – just tell the English translator or editor to cut the script to make it fit. It was functional, but also resulted in abridged English scripts of lower quality than their Japanese counterparts.

Those are the most significant issues, but there are other conundrums. Japanese characters are monospaced, with each symbol having the same width. Typical English fonts do not – the "l" is thinner than the "E", for example. The most straightforward implementation was just to enforce English monospace fonts, which worked, but look ugly. (Many 8-bit games used these, but they can be seen as late as *Dragon Warrior VII* on the PlayStation.) Alternatively, the text engine would need to be rewritten to use variable width fonts, so letters could be spaced correctly.

We've gone over a few of the technical issues, but there were other roadblocks too. Japanese companies of the '80s and '90s operated on a very different wavelength from their American



「Ranger, are you working?
You are working hard!



Aeris
"This guy are sick."

A couple of famous translation gaffes are pictured here: *Breath of Fire II* for the SNES (left) with some unnatural sounding dialogue, and *Final Fantasy VII* for the PlayStation (right) with an obvious grammatical error.

counterparts. The ocean between them made communication slow and problematic; it often relied on fax machines to send data. Despite the money flowing in from overseas, Japanese companies also didn't really feel it was of much concern to them, since they were so physically far away, it may as well have been a different world.

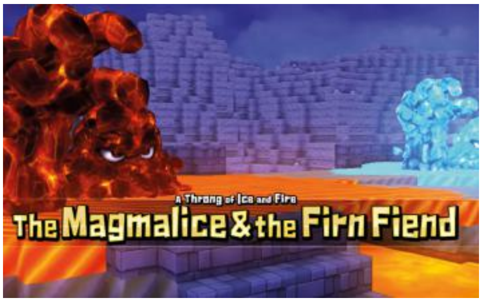
Additionally, translating text required ... well, translators. Since these early video games were often targetted towards kids, who are typically not the greatest judges of language quality, Japanese companies skimped on hiring professionals, simply finding anyone in their vicinity who had some grasp of the language and having them translate it. The poor quality of the results was often extremely apparent, and while it may have flown in action-based games with little text, it was a huge issue with titles like *Final Fantasy II*, where the story was the major point of the experience. In this case, Square eventually hired skilled localisers, usually native English speakers, to help improve the text, though they often had to work on tight deadlines. One of the most notable early English language translators and script writers was Ted Woolsey (*Secret of Mana, Final Fantasy III/VI, Chrono Trigger*), but other notable translators and localisation directors for Square include Alexander O. Smith (*Vagrant Story, Final Fantasy XII*) and Richard Honeywood (*Chrono Cross, Dragon Quest VIII, Ni no Kuni*). An early proponent of quality localisations was Working Designs, who largely trafficked in anime-style RPGs like *Lunar: The Silver Star* and *Popful Mail*. Their translations weren't always authentic, often sticking in bits of humour and pop culture references where they weren't entirely appropriate, but they were also much better written than those in most other 16-bit RPGs.

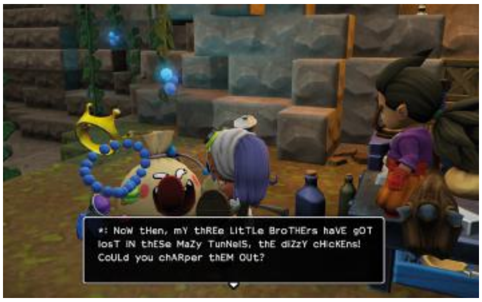
Video games are also unlike books or scripts in that they are not linear. Much of the dialogue comes from NPCs, which the player can talk to at their leisure. Much of the text consists of item or enemy names, too. Japanese scripts were typically not organised in a comprehensible manner, which meant that the translator had to deal with disparate bits of text, lacking in context. And since the translators rarely had access to the games themselves to check, they had make their best educated guesses as to what the text was referring to. Mistakes were not uncommon – in the PlayStation release of *Final Fantasy V*, there's a monster called a "Wyvern" but the text refers to a "Y Burn". This error is obvious when looking at it during the game, but the translator likely didn't realise it was supposed to be an enemy name, the Japanese programmer implementing the text likely didn't understand it, and quality control didn't catch it, if such a department even tested it.

Another major issue with translation and localisation is cultural. Different cultures across the world have different histories and values, and commercial marketplaces are often different as well. Nintendo of America in particular was a little overprotective – their market was primarily children, but the games were purchased by their parents, whom they didn't want to offend. They prevented the use of crosses and pentagrams in their titles, for fear of offending conservative Christian parents. References to alcohol were scrubbed out too, for fear that it would be seen as promoting underage drinking. Japanese children's media is also a bit more permissive of sexual humour than its American counterpart, so such jokes had to be rewritten.

Other issues went beyond typical standards and practices, though. Pretty much every Japanese child at the time knew what *Doraemon* and *Gundam* were, but these were completely unknown at the time to Americans. Seaweed-wrapped rice balls (called origiri) are extremely common in Japanese cuisine, but at the time in America, they were completely unseen outside of Asian grocery markets. The list goes on – historical and mythological references, Shintoism or Buddism – most American kids had no idea what any of these things were. Some games changed these references – changing rice balls to hamburgers was common – while others were left in place even if very few understood what they meant.

Some of these issues changed as the audience got older, and with this change, came the ESRB, the American ratings organisation that classified whether games were meant for kids, teenagers, or adults. As long as they were rated properly, the alcohol references could stay, and female characters no longer needed to cover up. Religious iconography also stayed, because, as it turned out nobody really took offence at their presence, and titles that did have overt religious themes (like *Shin Megami Tensei Nocturne* and *Xenogears*) flew under their radar anyway.




*: NoW tHen, mY thREe LitTLe BroTHErs haVE gOT losT IN thESe MaZy TunNelS, thE diZzY cHicKEns! CoULd you chARper thEM OUt?

In the English *Dragon Quest Builders* (left), the enemies known in Japan as the Lava Demon and Ice Demon get much more amusing names: the Magmalice and the Firn Fiend. Some of the character accents are wild, as this Goodybag monster (right) speaks in Polari slang.

Around this time, publishers also paid more attention to localisations, to help better adapt the material for international audiences. This tended to rankle with gamers who clamoured for more "authentic" translations that hewed as closely as possible to the original Japanese text. But "authenticity" doesn't really mean much when translating between languages, especially ones as different as Japanese and English. Translating a Japanese sentence literally can eliminate its nuance and humour, so the better approach is to take the same concept and rewrite it in a way that's natural to native speakers. A given line of text should inspire the same emotional reactions regardless of the language, even if it means rewriting the actual sentence.

The amount of adaptation depends on the game itself, as well as its audience. A good example of this is *Pokémon*, primarily meant for children, which localises many of the names of the eponymous creatures. Fushigidane, for example, means absolutely nothing to an English speaker, but its English counterpart, Bulbasaur, brings to mind a dinosaur with a plant bulb ... which is exactly what it is. On the other hand, the *Persona* games are meant for teenagers and adults, who may be interested in Japanese culture, so the localisation even retains things like Japanese honorifics (suffixes like -"san" and "-kun", which imply respect levels and camaraderie between characters). Nintendo of America and its localisation department, Treehouse, tend to be more creative with its text, adding in quite a bit of playful humour, resulting in games that may not be completely faithful to their Japanese counterparts, but feel far more natural to native English speakers than a more direct translation would allow.

One of the best RPG localisations is Square's *Vagrant Story* by Alexander O. Smith. Much of the English version was written as if it were a Shakespearean play, with lots of flowery and dramatic dialogue. It works stunningly well, and that same style has since been tied to the works of that game's director, Yasumi Matsuno. Subsequent games, like *Final Fantasy XII*, and the re-localisations of the PSP ports of *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Tactics Ogre*, share this style.

Of particular note are the localisations of the *Dragon Quest* games. When originally released in English as *Dragon Warrior*, the text had a fictional Ye Olde English-style writing, to give everything a medieval feel. That went away as the series went on, but with *Dragon Quest VIII* on the PlayStation 2, Square Enix put a lot of effort into the English language versions, adding in voice acting that wasn't in the original Japanese release, and utilising both British spellings and British voice actors. Many of the enemies were granted new names that had either fun alliterations or goofy puns. (The Ham Shamwitch, denoting a hat-wearing pig, is both hilarious and fun to say.) It also makes use of accents, though it can be hard to read out French or Scottish accents when written in text.

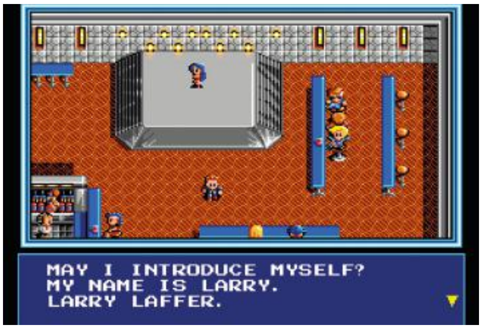
Other cross-cultural issues have become more apparent over the years. The most prominent example was Nintendo's and Monolith's *Xenoblade Chronicles X* – in its original Japanese release, it features an android that looks like a 12-year-old girl, and includes an incredibly skimpy bikini as an optional outfit for her. Nintendo of America realised this wouldn't fly, and so removed the costume. (They also removed the ability to customise the female avatar's chest size, regardless of her clothing.)

The rise of social media also enabled minority voices to speak out against negative portrayals. A key example of this is a scene in *Persona* 5, where a teenage character, Ryuji, is approached by a stereotypically homosexual duo. Their actions are meant to be comical but come off as perpetrating predatory stereotypes. For the re-release, *Persona 5 Royal*, the English localisation team rewrote the scene to make the characters less predatory, while still keeping the humour.

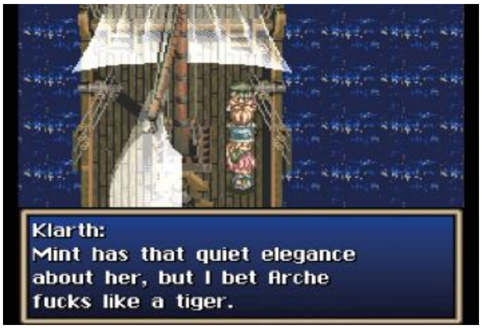
In the end, the old saying holds: translation really is more of an art than a science.

Fan Translations

The language barrier in JRPGs obviously proves to be a tremendous issue for non-Japanese speakers. Many gaming magazines through the '90s had international sections that listed all of the amazing-looking games that would probably never leave Japan, including sequels to popular titles, like *Final Fantasy V* and *Seiken Densetsu 3*. Some intrepid fans wrote guides and posted them on the internet, for print-out, to help during play, but this was unwieldy. However, it was possible for fans to hack into the game's ROM files, translate the script, and add it back in, making the game playable in English, or any other language.



MAY I INTRODUCE MYSELF?
MY NAME IS LARRY.
LARRY LAFFER.



Klarth:
Mint has that quiet elegance
about her, but I bet Arche
fucks like a tiger.

Two early English fan translations: *SD Snatcher* (left) for the MSX2 by Oasis, and *Tales of Phantasia* (right) for the Super Famicom by DeJap Translations.

Naturally, this is all much easier said than done. The localisation problems we discussed earlier were tough enough, despite assuming that the programming would be done by the original developers, or at least people who had access to the source code. From the consumer end, all that's available is the compiled ROM, which means it basically needs to be reverse engineered to figure out where the text is located, and how to change it. This requires a whole lot of trial and error, not to mention various tools built into emulators. Even more problems arise, because some RPGs of the era tended to be held together with the digital equivalent of duct tape, and often crashed if even something minor went wrong. As a result, it takes an enormous amount of time and effort for the hackers, translators, and testers to be able to create a fully playable product in another language.

The first English fan translation, at least as far as anyone can figure out, was Oasis' *SD Snatcher* for the MSX2, seemingly released in Europe in the early '90s. As the game was released on disks, it was fairly easy to read and modify the game's files. Cartridges are a different story though, and while there were black market game copiers that let people dump the ROM files onto a disk to be read (and copied) by computers, these were expensive and hard to get hold of. It wasn't until the mid-'90s that internet access became widespread, and console emulators evolved to the point where they could offer an experience almost identical to playing on a real console. At this point, various groups like Aeon Genesis and DeJap Translations began translating titles.

As for the quality of the translations, they are done by amateurs, so they can vary. One of the most infamous fan translations is DeJap's *Tales of Phantasia* for the Super Famicom, which took liberties with some dialogue to inject some adult humour. This is in line with many fan-subtitled anime of the late '90s, particularly *Dragon Ball Z*, which added numerous extra curse words, as anime is reputedly not for kids. However, it's not like professional translations didn't often rewrite text in inappropriate ways (as Working Designs often did). Plus, since amateurs are often doing it solely out of passion, and they aren't working under deadlines or other constraints, they usually do a pretty good job. In particular, *Mother 3* for the Game Boy Advance has a fan translation by longtime *EarthBound* fan Clyde "Tomato" Mandelin that's easily on the same level as official translations from Nintendo.

Some official translations were also notoriously poor, or suffered from technical constraints. One of the most notorious is *Breath of Fire II* for the SNES, but there's a fan patch by Ryusui and d4s that completely retranslates the script into much more readable English, making for a far better experience. Hacking fixes more than just text though, as glitches and other annoying localisation tweaks can also be addressed. Enix's *The 7th Saga* was made ridiculously hard in the overseas version; a fan patch can adjust it to match the Japanese original. Many Working Designs titles had stat tweaks that made the game more frustrating and difficult; fan patches also alleviate these problems.

There's an obvious issue of legality here, which fan translation groups try to get around. Distributing a pre-modified ROM is definitely copyright infringement, so instead, patches are distributed that only contain the revised text, which can be applied to a Japanese ROM to change the language. This still treads a murky line, because, technically, even spreading translations of copyright text is not strictly legal, but it's something that game publishers tend to look away from, especially in the case of very old games where the publisher might no longer exist. But it's helped keep many games alive in English-speaking circles, enough that some even received official translations down the line (like the aforementioned *Final Fantasy V*, and *Seiken Densetsu 3*, localised as *Trials of Mana*).

However, even today, it's really only the popular titles that get a second chance in the wider marketplace. There are still scores and scores of games that will never be released in English, and are really only playable with fan translations; there are even more with no fan translations at all. As of 2020, none of the PC Engine *Tengai Makyou* games are playable in English; despite being a huge factor in the 16-bit JRPG landscape, they are almost unknown among English speakers. So the ROM hacking groups play a hugely important part in making sure these games are more widely understood by the international gaming audience.

Soundtracks

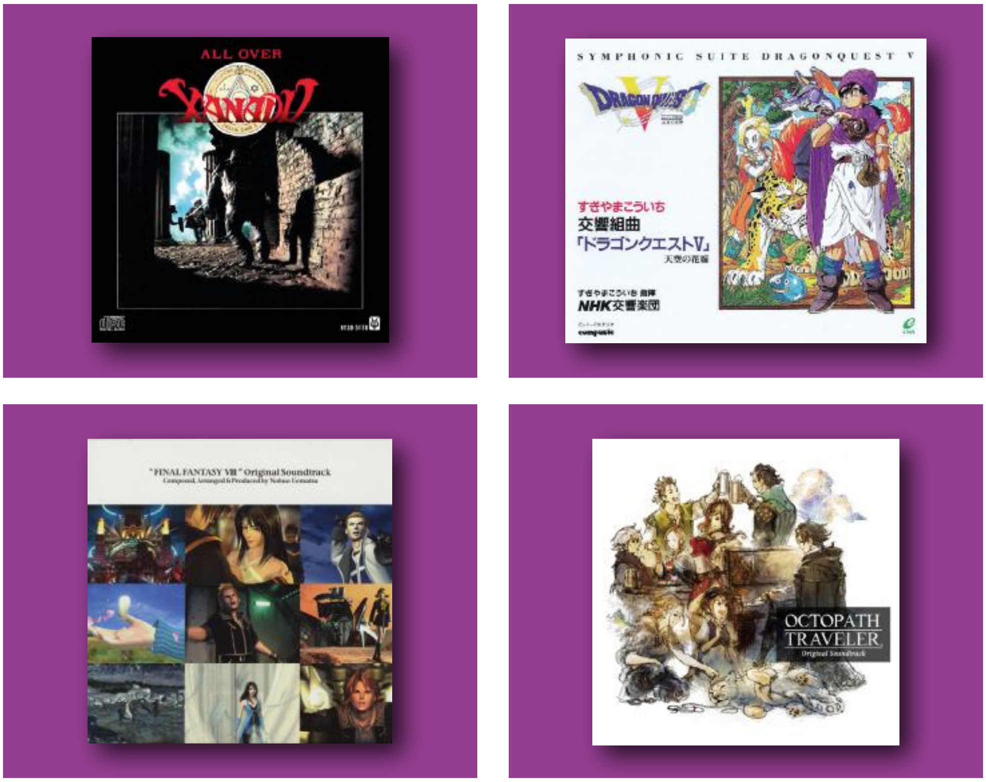
Video game music was simple in the beginning, often relegated to little ditties as sound effects, played during the game. But arcade sound hardware improved in the early '80s, allowing for simple but catchy melodies as heard in games like Namco's *Mappy* and *The Tower of Druaga.* While systems like the ColecoVision could play music, they were rarely used effectively. The Nintendo Entertainment System was the first home console with more complex sound hardware, and theme songs for games like *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda,* both by composer Koji Kondo, proved to be an essential accompaniment to the action. This resulted in a whole industry focused on video game music, selling soundtrack CDs with recordings of game compositions as well as arrangements using live instruments. Many companies even formed their own in-house bands, like SEGA's SST Band and Taito's Zuntata.

The video game music industry was spurred on first and foremost by hobbyists. Early on, sound hardware companies used PSG (programmable sound generation) synthesis. However, one of the big turning points was the YM2203 sound synthesizer, included with the PC8801mkIISR home computer and also available as separate accessory. The music in early PC games was simple beeps, if it existed at all; many were played in silence. The first big title with notable music was 1986's *Xanadu Scenario II,* which featured music by budding composer Yuzo Koshiro, who had sent a demo tape into Falcom, which decided to use his tracks. This sparked Falcom's reputation for excellent soundtracks, leading to 1987's *All Over Xanadu,* an arranged album played in a variety of styles using guitars, synthesizers and saxophones. Credited to the Xanadu Rockalight Orchestra, the company eventually formed the Falcom JDK Band, which is credited for the company's soundtracks to this day. Meanwhile, Koshiro supplied music for a number of other Falcom RPGs, like *Legacy of the Wizard* and *Sorcerian,* and later gained international fame with his incredible music for Quintet's *ActRaiser* and SEGA's *Streets of Rage.* He later returned to the FM synthesizer style that kickstarted his career with Atlus' *Etrian Odyssey* series, which was a throwback to classic first-person dungeon crawlers.

Dragon Quest, released in 1986, was also one of the most influential series in video game music. This used the works of Koichi Sugiyama, a classically trained composer who had worked on many films and commercials through the '70s and '80s. He was so impressed with one of Enix's early shogi (Japanese chess) titles that he wrote them a letter, and was shortly thereafter hired to compose for them. For *Dragon Quest,* Sugiyama channelled the works of composers like Richard Wagner, with the title screen theme becoming one of the most iconic in all of video gaming. In 1986, the soundtrack was rearranged for a live orchestra for the *Dragon Quest Suite* soundtrack, which led to orchestral concerts and many types of rendition for nearly every game in the series.

One of the other big RPG developers of the late '80s was Square, with many of its soundtracks being the work of its in-house composer Nobuo Uematsu. His soundtracks to the first three *Final Fantasy* games are decent, and also received arranged CDs, but it was really *Final Fantasy IV* for the SNES that put him on the map. The SNES sound chip was sample-based, able to use recordings of various instruments rather than computer-generated sounds, and it was an incredible bit of technology for the time. Uematsu continued to compose for the *Final Fantasy* series regularly up until the tenth entry (and contributed sporadically afterwards), while Square hired more composers who would go on to fantastic careers – Yasunori Mitsuda, known for *Chrono Trigger, Chrono Cross,* and *Xenogears*; Yoko Shimomura, who had worked on *Street Fighter II* with Capcom and did *Front Mission, Live-A-Live, Legend of Mana,* and *Kingdom Hearts* for Square; Kenji Ito, known for *SaGa* and its many related titles; Masashi Hamauzu, originally a contributor to *Final Fantasy X* before being put in charge for *Final Fantasy XIII,* as well as other games like *SaGa Frontier II* and *Unlimited Saga*; and many others. They also created many types of arranged soundtrack for their games, varying the musical style – *Final Fantasy IV* had an arranged album called *Celtic Moon* featuring (of course) Celtic-inspired music, while *Chrono Trigger* received one called *The Brink of Time,* an eccentric jazz fusion album. This allowed for a wide variety of interpretations of the soundtracks.

The *Megami Tensei* games were exclusive to Japan for a long time, but their soundtracks were fairly well regarded there. The early works were provided primarily by Tsukasa Masuko, an early employee of Atlus. *Megami Tensei II* is one of the handful of Famicom cartridges to include an extra sound synthesizer, bolstering the music with extra, stronger sound channels, and its moody rock style continued on the Super Famicom and into the



Left-to-right, top-to-bottom: *All Over Xanadu*, *Symphonic Suite Dragon Quest V*, *Final Fantasy VIII Original Soundtrack* and *Octopath Traveler Original Soundtrack*.

32-bit era. With the PlayStation 2 games, Masuko took a back seat, with Shoji Meguro becoming the series' primary composer. While he has a distinct rock style, many of his works mix in other genres, like the hip-hop tracks in *Persona 3* or the jazzy feel of *Persona 5*.

The advent of CD-ROM technology allowed the video game music industry to leap forward. Despite the famous works in video games in the late '80s and early '90s, the mass gaming audience still saw video game music as being simple bleeps and bloops, but CD-ROM games could play recorded music of any type, since they also functioned as audio CDs. Publishers pushed this hard, especially with games like *Ys Book I & II*, which took an already famous soundtrack (in Japan anyway) and rearranged it with high-energy synthesizers. Without the limits of sound chips, composers could provide any type of music they wanted, though much of it was based on '80s and '90s pop music.

While diverse styles of music were found across many types of games, role-playing game soundtracks are typically the most lauded. The main reason behind this is that role-playing games are almost always long. They feature plenty of different locales, and you're expected to listen to the same songs on loop for hours on end. Since you're subjected to them for so long, they'd better be good! Early soundtracks still didn't have many tracks – *Dragon Quest* only has eight tunes – but as the 16-bit era progressed, the games grew in size, as did the number of tracks they needed. By the end of the 16-bit era, *Final Fantasy VI* had over 60 tracks, with the soundtrack spread across three CDs.

Beyond the ones listed above, there are several other notable composers. The duo Hitoshi Sakimoto and Masaharu Iwata got their start similarly to that of Yuzo Koshiro, writing music for homebrew Japanese PC games before getting hired by Quest for games like *Magical Chase*. But it was their work on *Ogre Battle* that defined their signature orchestral style, which can be heard in later games like *Final Fantasy Tactics*, *Tactics Ogre*, and *Final Fantasy XII*. Sakimoto also founded the music production studio Basiscape, expanding its team of composers to work on games like *Odin Sphere* and *Dragon's Crown*.

Motoi Sakuraba worked closely on many titles for Telenet and Wolf Team, with his breakout console games being *Tales of Phantasia* and *Star Ocean* for the Super Famicom. He's worked closely with both Namco and tri-Ace on many of their games, but also contributed to work by Camelot (*Golden Sun*) and FromSoftware (*Dark Souls*). He's big into progressive rock, though some of his works also use a firmer orchestral sound.

These are but a few of the big names among JRPG fans, but there are many other distinctive soundtracks from a wide variety of composers; more recent hits include *The World Ends With You* (Takeharu Ishimoto), *Octopath Traveler* (Yasunori Nishiki), *Bravely Default* (Revo), and both *Nier* games (Keiichi Okabe, Kakeru Ishihama, Keigo Hoashi, and Takafumi Nishimura).

Anime

The worlds of Japanese video games, manga, and anime have been intertwined since their inception; consequently there are many cases of cross-media adaptations. However, the nature of these often varies from property to property. Listed here are some of the more popular series.

The first RPG adaptation was Falcom's *Xanadu*, a computer game released in 1985. However, the game itself didn't have much of a story – there was a generic fantasy-world setting, but as with most games of the time, the player controlled a user-created avatar, and the entire game was spent crawling through dungeons, which doesn't exactly make for compelling storytelling. In 1987, Falcom employee Kazuhiko Tsuzuki created a single volume manga called *Xanadu: Dragon Slayer Legend*, which created a new backstory, involving a soldier from the future who fell back into a medieval world. Despite being only tenuously related to the game, other than sharing some terminology, like "Dragon Slayer sword", this was used as the basis for a single-episode OVA, released in 1988. The artwork for the manga and anime was later used for certain releases of the PC game, even though the characters, warrior Fieg and bikini-clad archer Riel, don't appear in the game themselves.

By this time, *Dragon Quest* fever was sweeping Japan, which eventually led to two anime series. Rather than directly adapting any of the games, new characters and stories were created, essentially giving a brand new experience, even for those familiar with the games. The first, *Yuusha Abel Densetsu* ("The Legend of Hero Abel") ran for 43 episodes between 1989 and 1990 – the first 13 episodes were actually dubbed by Saban Entertainment and released internationally as *Dragon Warrior*. The second series, *Dai no Daibouken*, was an even bigger hit, with 46 episodes and three films, along with a 37-volume manga series. This resonated so strongly among the fanbase that it received a revival, along with a video game tie-in, nearly 30 years later, in 2020.

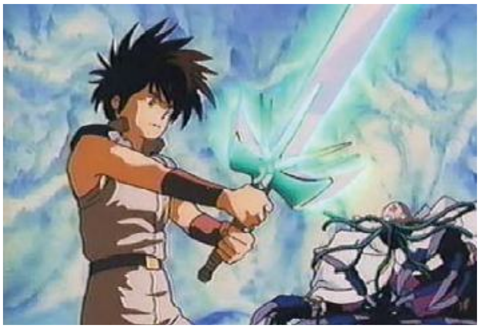
Final Fantasy's first anime tie-in came with *Legend of the Crystals*, a four-episode OVA released in 1994. Ostensibly a sequel to *Final Fantasy V*, it takes place 200 years after that game's story. Despite the presence of elements like crystals and Chocobos, it barely feels related to the core series. The same can be said of *Final Fantasy Unlimited*, a TV series from 2001, which is *Final Fantasy* in name only. Later adaptations were more closely tied to individual games, like *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, a fully CGI film sequel that takes place after that game's ending, and *Final Fantasy XV: Kingsglaive*, another CGI film that explains the game's backstory.

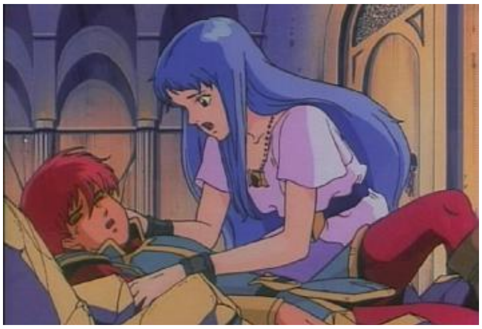
The first OVA for *Megami Tensei* is an adaptation of the original novel rather than the game, though there was a follow-up released in 1994 that was released internationally as *Tokyo Revelation*. This anime borrows one of the main themes of the game, demon summoning, as a way to appeal to fans of the occult, but otherwise doesn't tie into any of the main games nor feature any of the other main aspects (the post-apocalyptic, cyberpunk aesthetic, the mythological creatures) that made the core series so compelling. Due to the English name, it's nearly impossible to tell that it was meant to be a *Shin Megami Tensei* tie-in to begin with, other than by the occasional appearance of the game's logo.

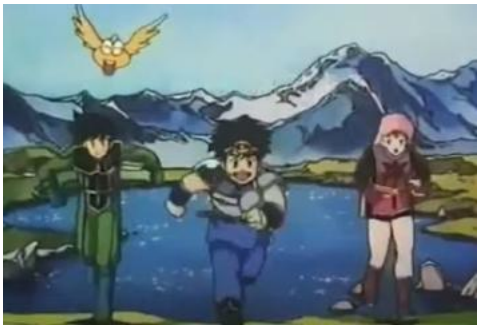
Some games only received partial adaptations, like Nintendo's *Fire Emblem* and Falcom's *Dragon Slayer: Legend of Heroes*, both released as OVAs with two episodes each. Since these only introduced the story, they're either meant as ways for fans to see these characters fully animated with voice actors, or as an introduction for potential fans, leading them into the game. Both of these were released in English, but at the time of their release in the late '90s, none of the *Fire Emblem* games had been localised (the hero's name was translated here as Mars, rather than Marth, as he would later be known), and *Dragon Slayer* was only on the relatively obscure TurboGrafx-16 CD-ROM system.

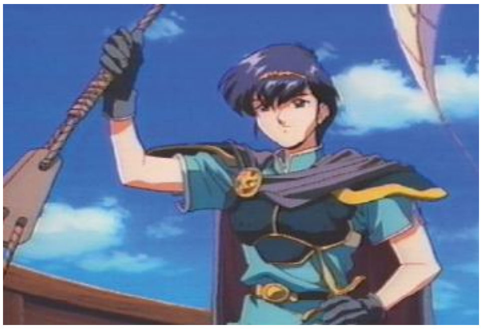
One of the better OVA adaptations of the time was Falcom's *Ys*, released as two series: four episodes based on the first game, and seven based on the second. Both of these effectively adapted the games' stories, while adding in extra plot elements that made them more suitable for the format. Fans could now see boss battles fully animated, and the soundtrack even consists of new arrangements of classic tunes.

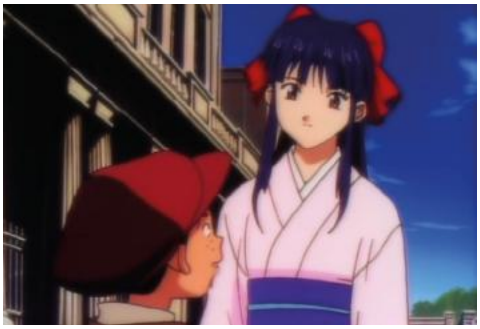
Namco's *Tales* series has a number of adaptations of varying natures. Of the TV series, *Tales of Eternia* (based on the game known as *Tales of Destiny II* in English) features the same

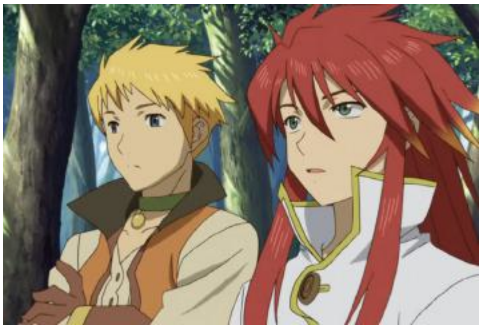












Featured left-to-right, top to-bottom: *Dragon Slayer: Xanadu, Ys: Book One, Dragon Quest: Dai no Daibouken, Fire Emblem, Sakura Wars,* and *Tales of the Abyss.*

characters, but in new stories unrelated to the games; meanwhile, *Tales of the Abyss* is a closer adaptation of the actual game. Other entries, like *Phantasia, Symphonia, Vesperia,* and *Zestiria* have shorter OVAs or film tie-ins, some of which flesh out the games' stories. tri-Ace's *Star Ocean: The Second Story* also received an adaptation known as *Star Ocean EX,* though even across its 26 episodes, it doesn't quite reach the end of the story.

Sakura Wars also received a few anime releases, including a full TV series covering the events of the first Saturn game, a few OVAs, and even a movie. Since SEGA had neglected to bring the actual games out in North America, this at least allowed overseas fans to enjoy the franchise in some capacity.

Some of the modern *Shin Megami Tensei* spinoffs have more accurate anime adaptations – *Persona 3* received a number of films, while *Persona 4, Persona 5,* and *Devil Survivor 2* received faithful ones as well, so anime watchers can experience the story without having played the games.

Of course, one of the most popular anime adaptations is *Pokémon,* which ended up being just one part of a massive franchise. Beginning in 1997, and based on the original Game Boy games, the tale of Ash Ketchum (based on the design of the main trainer from the game) has gone on for 22 seasons, all based on various *Pokémon* games, along with 22 animated films, and one Hollywood live action/CGI blend, *Detective Pikachu.* This set down the template for many other properties aimed at kids, including *Digimon, Medabots, Monster Rancher, Inazuma Eleven,* and *Yo-kai Watch.*

There have been numerous manga tie-ins too, some of which were, technically, used as the basis for the anime. There is plenty of video game manga that doesn't directly adapt a game's story so much as focus on individual characters. Many of these are displayed in 4-koma ("four-panel") format, most of which are comedic in nature. These are typically created by artists other than those who made the main game, allowing them to reinterpret familiar characters in different contexts, without having to adhere to a particular story.

Attack and Dethrone God

There are plenty of well known tropes in Japanese RPGs, like dudes with spiky hair and big swords, but probably the most unusual, at least to Western audiences, is the recurring trend of killing God. Please note that this section includes spoilers for several games, since the fact that a god is actually evil is a common plot twist. Major plot elements are revealed here for *Megami Tensei II, Final Fantasy Legend, Xenogears, Breath of Fire II, Final Fantasy Tactics, Final Fantasy X, Xenosaga,* and *Dragon Quest VII.*

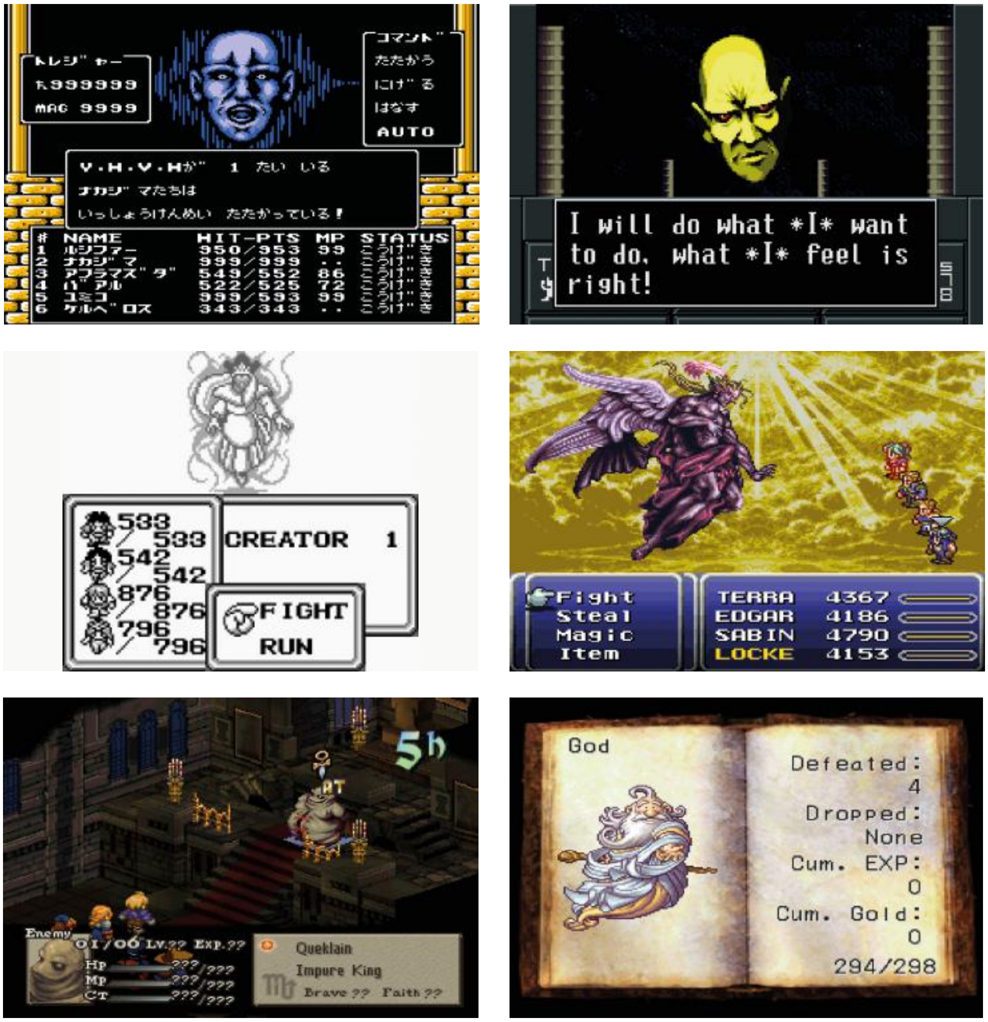
The most obvious explanation is that "godhood" is the ultimate form for a human to achieve, particularly bad guys. Conflicts need villains, and many RPGs feature tyrannical kings, demons, or monsters, so eventually things escalate further and further until you're taking on something or someone with almighty power. This is seen a lot in 16-bit games, especially titles from Square, where the main bad guys fashion themselves as incredibly elaborate idols, which was not only thematically impressive but also a good way to show off the skill of the company's sprite artists.

But beyond this, many JRPGs have another recurring theme – namely, distrust of organised religion. To understand why, involves understanding religion in Japan. Most Japanese practice Shintoism, Buddhism, or both, since they are not mutually exclusive. They actually differ substantially from other world religions like Christianity, Hinduism and Islam in that they aren't organised in the same way; they are a series of spiritual rituals and beliefs. Shintoism is polytheistic, with thousands upon thousands of "kami", which can be gods or other forces of nature. While Shintoism has its own creation myth, there is no established creator in Buddhism. Indeed, Buddhists don't even worship Buddha as a god, but rather as a figure to be admired.

The history of Christianity in Japan is a little rocky. Christian missionaries came from Europe in 1542 and actively began to convert many Japanese, but the daimyou Toyotomi Hideyoshi became threatened by its growing influence (primarily due to Christian intolerance of Shintoism and Buddhism, and slave trading), so a series of edicts was introduced at the end of the century that banned the religion from the country. This continued until the Meiji Restoration in 1868, after which Christian practice was again permitted, but it's still a minority religion, with about 1.5 million practising as of 2015.

Probably the most important video game in terms of understanding the broad attitude towards Christianity is Atlus' *Megami Tensei* series, in which gods and mythological beings of all faiths and religions co-exist. Thor, the Norse god of Thunder, is just as real as Amaterasu, the Japanese god of the sun, or Lucifer, the Christian devil. And if Zeus, the leader of the Greek gods, who toyed with humans in cruel ways, is real, then why not the Christian God? A recurring enemy in the series is YHVH, or Yahweh, the Hebrew name of the Christian God – here, he is based on his Old Testament activities, such as destroying nearly all of humanity with a flood, rather than being the love-thy-neighbour version described by Jesus Christ in the New Testament. YHVH ends up being a recurring antagonist in the franchise, it being one of the few in which you actually fight the Biblical God, rather than a non-denominational or allegorical being.

This can be seen in Capcom's *Breath of Fire II*, where the main antagonist, Deathevan, creates the St. Eva Church with the intention of collecting human souls. Considering how, historically, European Christians preached the gospel of Christ while capturing Japanese citizens and selling them into slavery, it's easy to see how the Christian church could be viewed negatively. Something similar can be seen in *Final Fantasy Tactics* and the Church of Glabados, which focuses on the Christ-like figure of Saint Ajora, who was actually possessed by an evil demon. *Final Fantasy X* has followers of the teachings of Yevon, drawn in due to the constant cycle of death that plagues their land, although Yevon is eventually revealed to be the cause of all their world's destruction and suffering. All in all, entities that make great promises, but are full of lies, make for great villains.



I will do what *I* want to do, what *I* feel is right!

JRPG gods through the ages: left-to-right, top-to-bottom: YHVH from *Megami Tensei II* and *Shin Megami Tensei II*, the Creator from *The Final Fantasy Legend*, *Kefka* from *Final Fantasy VI*, Queklain/Cúchulainn from *Final Fantasy Tactics*, and God from *Dragon Warrior VII*.

Furthermore, if you agree with the Buddhist Truth "existence is suffering", why not be avenged on the creator responsible for your existence? Indeed, what if all of the pain and suffering are just to entertain some cosmic being? That's the exact premise of the finale of *Final Fantasy Legend*, in which your heroes travel across several worlds, only to learn that all of their adventures were just for the entertainment of the creator. Rejecting their reward, they instead strike back in retaliation, angry at being manipulated. (In Japanese, he is called Kami, or "god", while the English version translates this simply as "Creator").

Japanese fiction often plays with world mythology in creative ways, as can be seen in games like *Valkyrie Profile*. But *Xenosaga* plays fast and loose with Christian mythology, as Mary Magdalene, one of the followers of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, plays a central role in the story. Since Japan isn't really a Christian nation, they can write stories like this without worrying about offending customers or committing blasphemy. Obviously this ends up coming off a little bit problematic when these games are exported overseas to countries that believe in Christianity more firmly.

However, not all game religions are represented as evil. Central to the *Dragon Quest* series is a Christianity-like religion that follows the teachings of a Goddess; the Church is a place you need to visit regularly to save your game or resurrect fallen comrades. God is a figure in *Dragon Quest VII*, and he's actually presented as a friendly character. *Dragon Quest IX* features a race of angel-like beings, called Celestrians, who watch over the humans below, though they also tend to the gigantic World Tree, based on Yggdrasil of Norse mythology, another recurring trope in JRPGs.

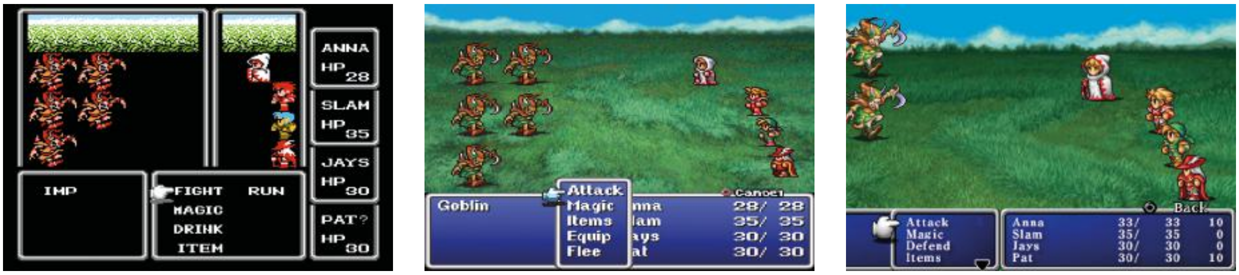
Indeed, religious themes, of sorts, are found regularly in JRPGs. Beneath the planet in *Final Fantasy VII* is the Lifestream, not only the source of all life but where the departed return to, when their lifetime is over. The harvesting of this resource by the Shinra Corporation not only shows how evil it is, but also functions as a metaphor for climate change, and how humanity must respect nature if it wants to survive.

Remakes

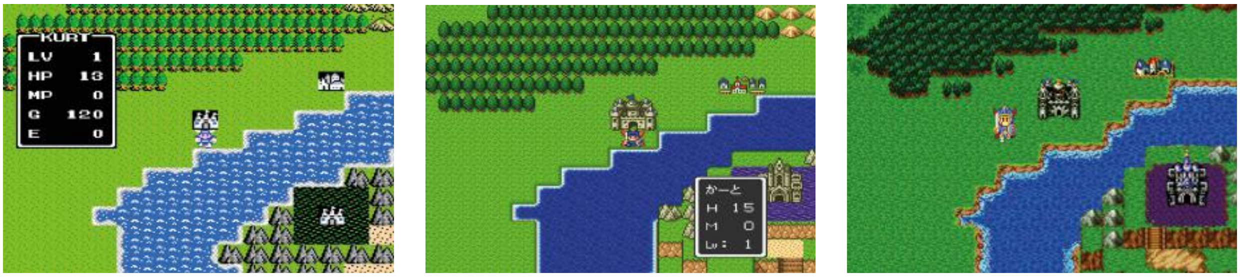
Technology marches on, and what was once state of the art can become outdated very quickly. Publishers often reissue their older catalogue, sometimes simply by releasing console emulations, which are basically identical to the original versions. But other times, they'll enhance the game by redrawing the graphics or rearranging the music to be more suitable for the platform they're issuing on. Sometimes they keep the mechanics the same, maybe just fixing up some bugs, but other games will get changes, particularly reducing the difficulty or increasing the amount of gold and experience gained through battle, to reduce the tedium. This can be seen in *Final Fantasy* (NES, PlayStation, PlayStation Portable) and *Dragon Quest* (NES, Super Famicom, and Switch).

In some cases, these go beyond just mere touch-ups and instead change so much that they're almost new products. Among those pictured here is *Final Fantasy Adventure* (Game Boy, Game Boy Advance, Vita), also known as *Sword of Mana* and *Adventures of Mana*, as well as *Phantasy Star* (SEGA Master System, PlayStation 2). Some were entirely remade for 3D, including *Romancing SaGa* (Super Famicom, PlayStation 2) and *Trials of Mana* (Super Famicom, PlayStation 4). Of all of these, *Final Fantasy VII* (PlayStation, PlayStation 4) underwent the most drastic changes, hugely expanding the setting, changing to a more action-type combat system, and adding hours of fully voiced cutscenes. It's also only the first chapter in what's intended to be a multi-game spanning-saga.

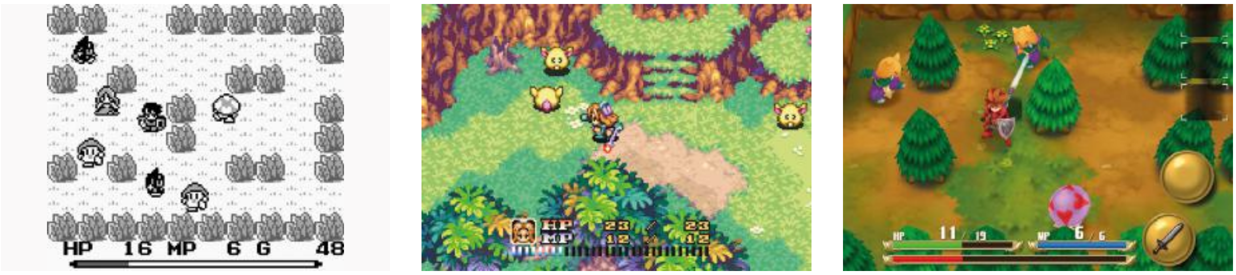
Final Fantasy


IMP
FIGHT
RUN
MAGIC
DRINK
ITEM
ANNA HP 28
SLAM HP 35
JAYS HP 30
PAT? HP 30
Goblin
Attack
Magic
Items
Equip
Flee
Cancel
Attack
Magic
Defend
Items
Anna
Slam
Jays
Pat
Back

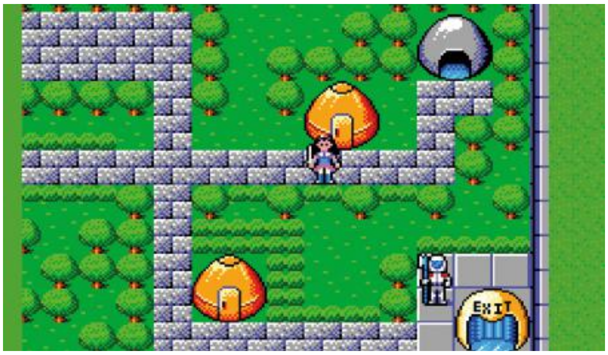
Dragon Quest

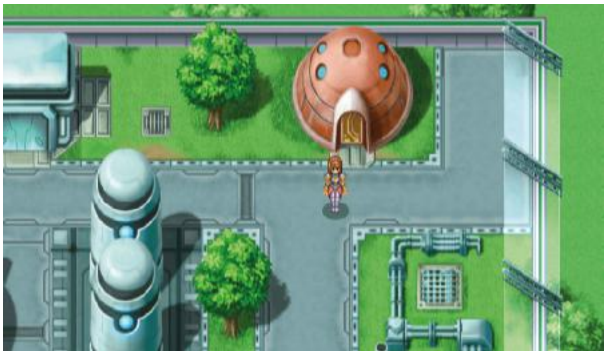

KURT
LV 1
HP 13
MP 0
G 120
E 0
かーと
H 15
M 0
Lv: 1

Final Fantasy Adventure – Sword of Mana – Adventures of Mana

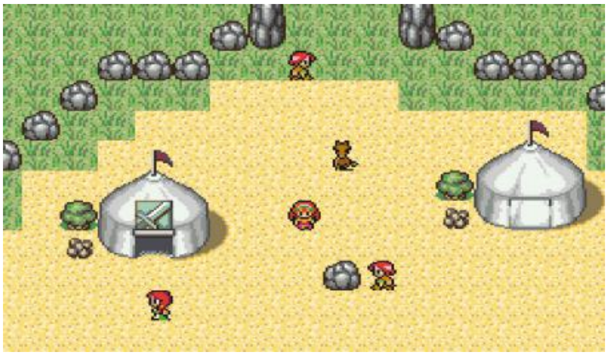

HP 16 MP 6 G 48
HP
MP
HP 11 / 19
MP 6 / 6

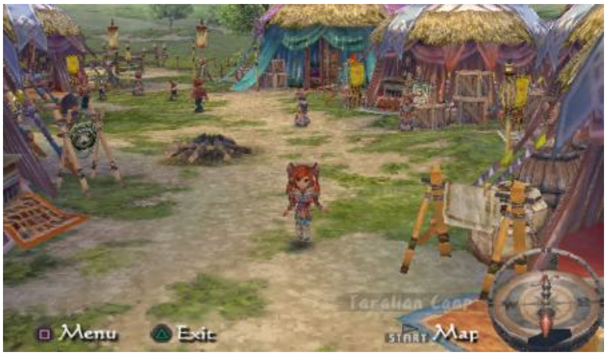
Phantasy Star



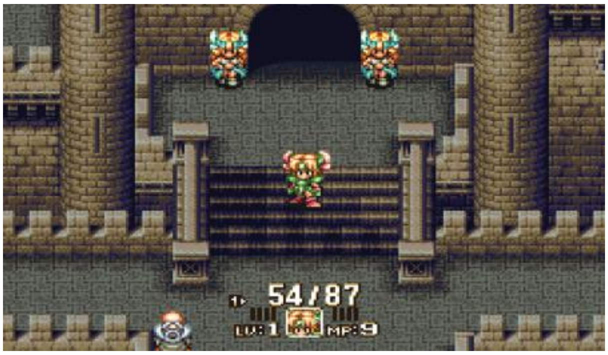


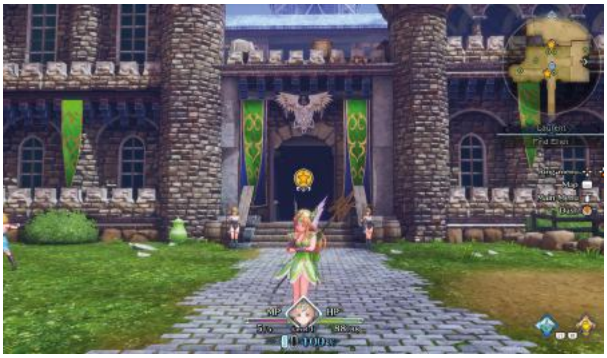
Romancing SaGa



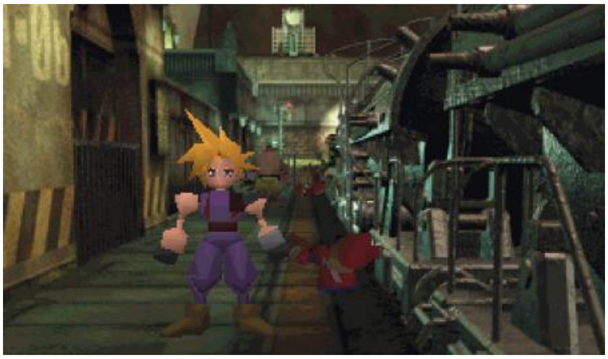

Taralian Camp
Menu
Exit
START Map

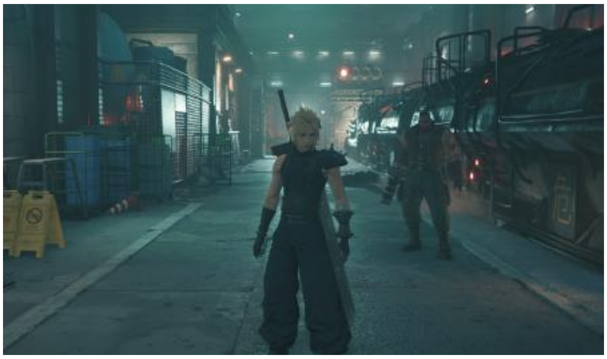
Trials of Mana


54/87
LV:1
MP:9



Final Fantasy VII





SHOP

Japanese PC RPGs

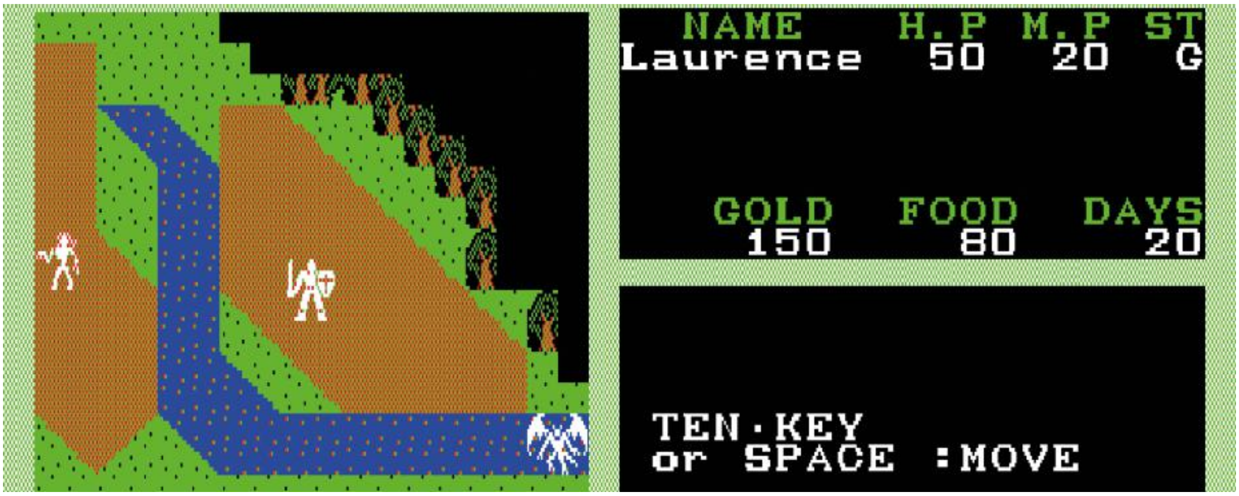
The '80s video game industry was basically an open frontier, regardless of the genre or territory. There were no real established genres and no idea of what the consumers really wanted, so the games put out were often the creative whims of the programmers. Companies like Enix and Bothtec held contests and solicited submissions (not unlike Electronic Arts in North America), with the best games getting commercial distribution in some form. Of course, since no one really knew what they were doing, there were plenty of interesting ideas, but the games themselves often suffered from various technical or design issues that make them difficult to play, by modern standards. That was just as true in the '80s, so gamers often turned to magazine strategy guides to help them out. This was frustrating, but in many ways it didn't matter – back then, just playing the role of some little dude on a monitor or TV screen was its own reward, and there was no expectation of actually "beating" the game you'd purchased or typed in.

When it came to RPGs, there were some templates for Japanese developers to follow, primarily *Wizardry* and *Ultima*, both of which were imported from the United States. While very early games hew closely to these formats, developers quickly started taking elements of them and steering them in new and interesting ways. Some games aren't much different from what Western developers were putting out at time, but others, particularly the adult software from Koei, was wildly divergent. Many of the more interesting ones are featured in this chapter, though the games that are pure dungeon crawlers are featured in their own section later in this book (see pg. 556).

This section covers the PC RPG industry of the '80s through to the mid-'90s. As with most things with Japanese RPGs, the eras can be divided into before *Dragon Quest* (circa 1986) and after *Dragon Quest*. During the early period, it was difficult to decide what an "RPG" actually was, so there are some games featured here that termed themselves "simulations", while others advertised themselves as "RPGs" even though the role-playing elements as we understand them today are sparse. During the latter period, even PC RPGs took a little more closely after their console counterparts, but were often a little different – aimed at an older and more sophisticated audience, they were more difficult (or perhaps, just not as refined) – plus they took advantage of the extra disk space afforded to computers to create more visually arresting games. A good number of these were later ported to consoles. By the time the console CD-ROM formats rolled around, the space advantage of PCs had essentially disappeared. Those developers still focusing on PCs mostly did so in order to avoid console licensing fees, and to publish whatever they wanted, without regulation. But most elected to make the jump to consoles eventually, since that's generally where the money was.

Even though it's not technically a computer game, we're also sticking Namco's *Tower of Druaga* series into this chapter. As a 1984 release, it has more in common with the design philosophies of this era than any other.

Early 8-bit RPGs were graphically quite simple, though they became more complex as technology advanced throughout the '80s.



```
NAME      H.P  M.P  ST
Laurence   50   20   G

GOLD   FOOD   DAYS
 150     80     20

TEN·KEY
or SPACE  :MOVE
```

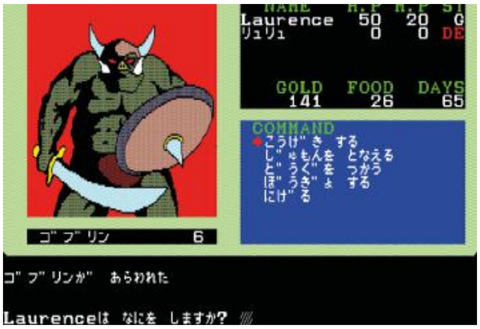
Mugen no Shinzou (series)

Developer: XtalSoft | Released: 1984 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98

XtalSoft (pronounced "Crystal Soft") was one of the handful of publishers specialising in RPGs in the early days of the Japanese PC scene. Their most important series is *Mugen no Shinzou* ("Heart of Fantasy"), heralded as one of the pillars of the country's RPG history. The series was helmed by Kazunari Tomi, who began his career with XtalSoft, then left in the late '80s to work for Falcom for a few years, on titles like *Star Trader* and *Dinosaur*. He then struck out on his own to form Studio Alex, the production team that created the *Lunar* series for the SEGA CD.

The *Mugen no Shinzou* trilogy tells the story of a warrior who lost a battle and has been whisked away to a limbo-like dream world. He has a certain amount of in-game time in order to obtain the "Heart of Fantasy" so he can escape, and avoid a fate worse than death. The series isn't very well known even among Japanese players, since none of their games were ported to consoles, plus even at release, the games were overshadowed by more popular games like *Xanadu*. However they remain foundational pillars of the JRPG world.

Mugen no Shinzou takes the overhead exploration elements of the early *Ultima* games and combines them with the turn-based combat of *Wizardry*. In the first game, the player character is not shown on the screen, but is rather represented by a square that you guide through the land, defeating enemies and exploring dungeons. The view of the map is quite small, restricted to 5 × 5 squares; the right side of the screen is reserved for larger visuals, when you enter a town or fight a battle. The artwork for these is pretty decent considering the graphic display technology of the time. The closest English-language parallel is *Miracle Warriors: Seal of the Dark Lord*, another early PC RPG, which was released the next year in Japan and made its way internationally on the SEGA Master System. As in the early *Ultima* games, dungeon exploration is handled via a first-person wireframe view. All in all, it is a typical game of the time – very difficult, very grindy, and worse, since there's a time limit, you can't spend too long wandering about or the whole game will be over. You only control a single character here too, so there's not really a whole lot to combat.



```
NAME      H.P  M.P  ST
Laurence   50   20   G
リュリュ     0    0  DE

GOLD  FOOD  DAYS
 141    26    65

COMMAND
●こうげ" き  する
 し" ゅもんを  となえる
 ど" うぐ" を  つかう
 ぼ" うぎ" ょ  する
 にげ" る

ゴ" ブ" リン          6

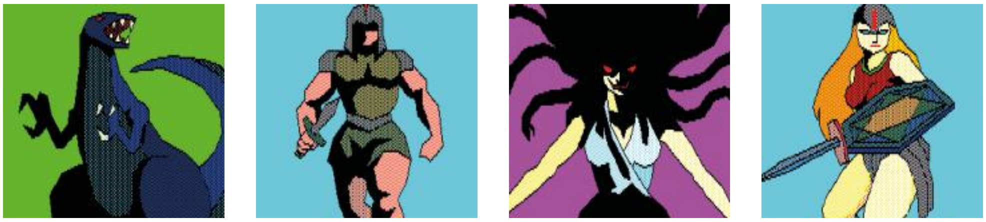
ゴ" ブ" リンが"  あらわれた

Laurenceは  なにを  しますか?
```

The sequel, released in 1985, is a big improvement. It's not as overwhelmingly difficult, the load times are faster, and the visuals on the overworld map are greatly improved – the characters are basically just stick figures, but the higher resolution and use of colour actually make it look quite a bit better than the Apple II, Commodore 64, or IBM PC versions of the first four *Ultima* games. You can find party members all around the land to fight alongside you too, of four different races and seven types of innate ability. The premise here is that the hero escaped the dream world from the previous game to find himself back in the land of the living ... but it's not his original world, but rather a parallel one, so he needs to fight the Dark Prince to find his

夢幻の心臓
PC-9801

***Mugen no Shinzou II* (all screenshots on this page) is the defining entry in the series.**



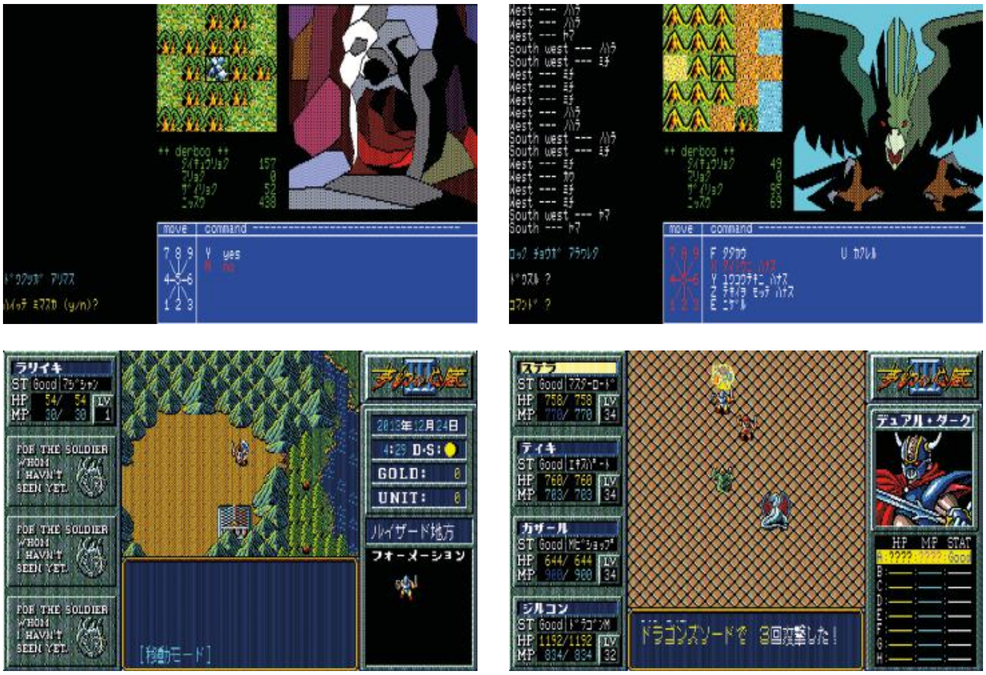
The enemy artwork is indeed excellent for its time.

way home. There are also three overworld maps to explore, based on the human, elf, and dark worlds.

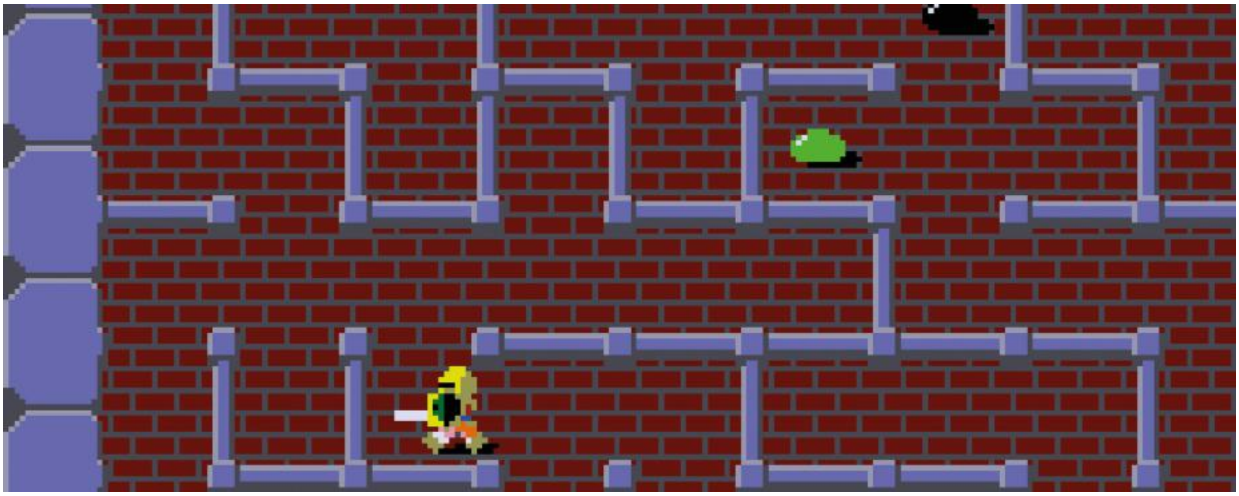
There's some discussion among Japanese RPG enthusiasts about whether *Dragon Quest* is a rip-off of *Mugen no Shinzou II*. There are certainly some similarities in the structure and (arguably) the overworld map design, though some of them are just fantasy tropes (there are dragons and princesses!) and it's not like any developer had a monopoly on an "*Ultima/Wizardry* combo". But *Mugen no Shinzou II* is aimed towards an older, PC-based audience, so it's a bit more complex. Your warriors need to watch their hunger – they need constant feeding – plus there's a line of sight mechanic that keeps the player from seeing behind obstacles, two aspects that were ditched from *Dragon Quest*. And while random encounters were standard in JRPGs for a long time, largely thanks to *Dragon Quest*, here in *Mugen no Shinzou II*, enemies are actually visible on the map (called "symbol encounters" in Japanese). *Mugen no Shinzou II*, as with its predecessor, also has no music, something which doesn't really fly in the console space. Since *Dragon Quest* was a Famicom game, and was primarily for children (or at least families), it's easy to see why some PC RPG mechanics were simplified, though later games added back in some complexity, like multiple party members.

A third game was released in 1990, though without its original creator. The warrior here has escaped back to his original world … except billions of years have passed, so everything is completely unrecognisable. This game fleshes out the backstory of all of the others, with 15 parallel worlds bound together by a magic sword, though chaos broke them all apart. Five years passed between this game and its predecessor, so the visuals were much better, actual music was included, more types of beings (including dragons and giants) to join your team, as well as a class change system. The battle system has changed too, with an overworld perspective closer to *Ultima III* and *IV*, along with an auto battle function to speed things up.

Around the time *Mugen no Shinzou III* was released, XtalSoft went out of business, with many of its staff going to T&E Soft, while others joined Square, where they worked on games like *Final Fantasy Legend III* and *Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest*. Other RPGs put out before the company's closure include the action RPG *Jehard* (which seems to be a misspelling of the word "jihad") and three games in the *Crimson* series.

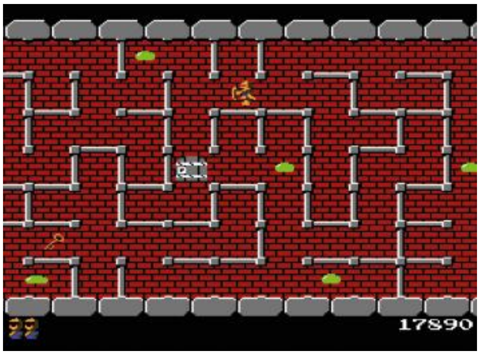


The original *Mugen no Shinzou* (top row) has a tiny exploration window, while the third game (bottom row) is similar to other contemporary (early '90s) PC RPGs.



The Tower of Druaga (series)

Developer: Namco | Released: 1984 | Platform(s): ARC, FC, PCE, SFC, PS2



namcot
DRUAGA
HuCARD

During the '80s, Namco was known for worldwide arcade hits like *Pac-Man*, *Galaga*, and *Dig Dug*. However, there were also a substantial number of games developed by the company that never really left their home country. *The Tower of Druaga* is one of the most interesting, because it presents an experience completely unique to Japanese arcade culture. It was designed by Masanobu Endou, the creator of *Xevious*.

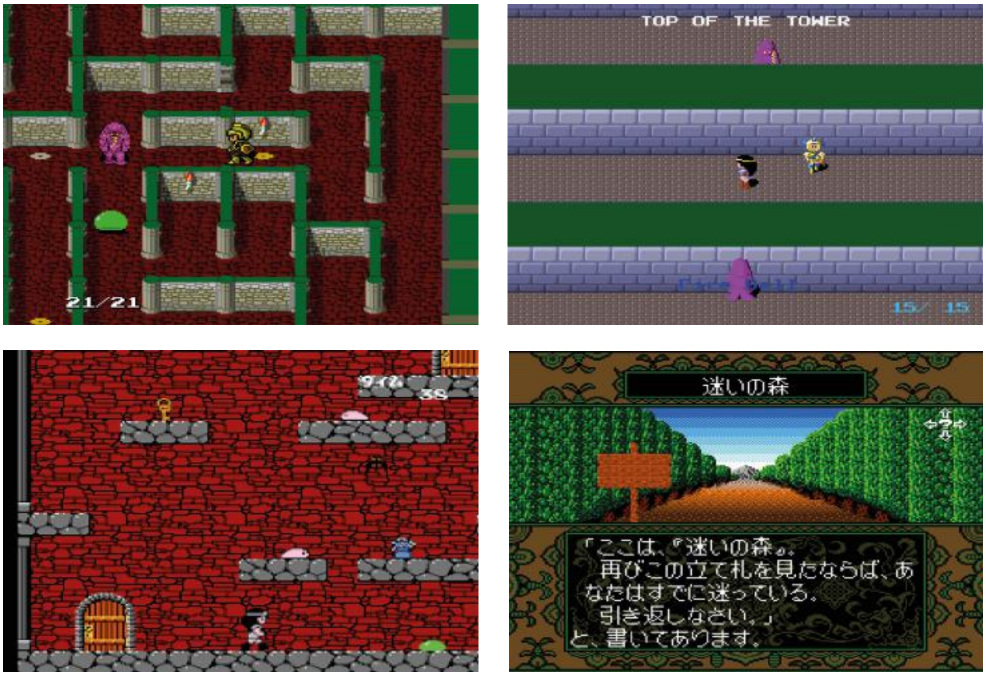
The premise is that the priestess Ki has been kidnapped by the evil monster Druaga, who has imprisoned her at the top of a 60-floor tower. As the heroic knight Gil (short for Gilgamesh), you must scale the tower to find her. Initially, the game seems pretty simple – you navigate through mazes to find keys to unlock the entry doors to further stages. The layout of each level is static but the locations of the keys, doors, and enemies change with every game. Additionally, nearly all of the floors contain hidden items, and the conditions for getting these to appear are not only different for each stage, but aren't actually revealed in the game itself. Some are relatively straightforward – for example, kill a few black slimes in the second stage to reveal the jet boots, which will let Gil walk much faster. But the game quickly becomes more obscure in later stages, where you might need to, say, touch a specific wall, walk on certain tiles, do something weird like opening the exit door without actually going into it, or just hit the Start button. Some of the collected items make the game easier. Others are almost essential, for example, items that light up otherwise dark stages. Some items are needed to beat the game; if you miss one of these, and go to the next floor, or lose them when getting zapped back to a previous floor, you're basically screwed.

RPGs of the early '80s seem to be defined by how impenetrable they are to complete, and *The Tower of Druaga* is perhaps the purest example of this. The difference between this and, say, Falcom's *Xanadu,* is that this was an arcade game, and thus a communal experience. There are tales of arcade cabinets that had little diaries, where players could share their experiences and give clues to other gamers, enabling them to find the many hidden items, as well as imparting the secret techniques to beat Druaga at the end of the game. Eventually, enough gamers playing enough times could solve the mystery of the game. Later console ports switched up the levels, as well as changing the conditions for item appearance.

There's no real equivalent to this in Western culture, and indeed, when versions of *The Tower of Druaga* finally started making their way outside of Japan, contained on compilation discs, no one knew what to make of it. It's an expression of a very particular place and time, one which passed most of the world by.

There was never a straight sequel to the game, although the PC Engine release is greatly enhanced, with zoomed-in visuals. But the series continued, with a variety of spinoffs, dubbed the *Babylonian*

Developed on the same hardware as *Mappy*, the visuals and music in the arcade version (header) are charming in their simplicity. Directly above is the artwork for the enhanced PC Engine port, while the screen above left is the Famicom version, included as a bonus pack-in with the GameCube RPG *Baten Kaitos*.



「ここは、『迷いの森』。
　再びこの立て札を見たならば、あ
なたはすでに迷っている。
　引き返しなさい。」
と、書いてあります。

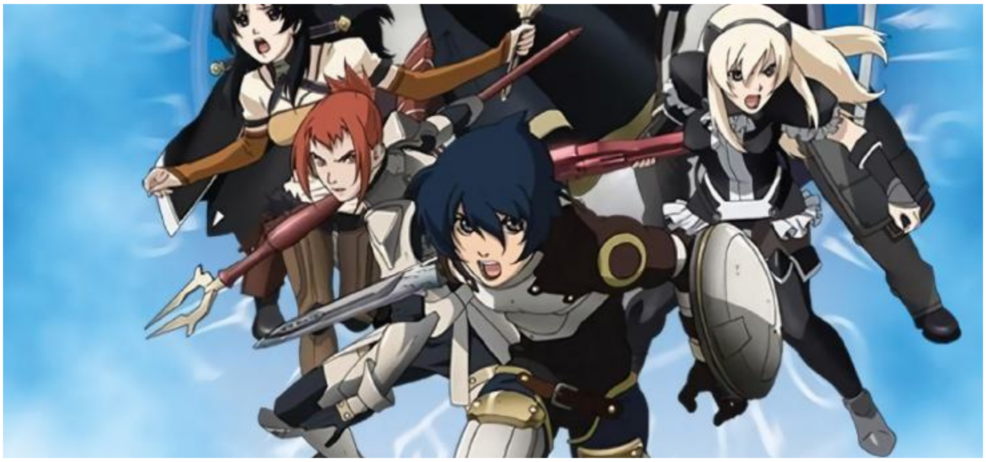
namcot
カイの冒険
KI

Main panel, clockwise from top left: *The Tower of Druaga* (PC Engine port), *The Return of Ishtar*, *The Blue Crystal Rod*, and *The Quest of Ki*. Also featured above is the artwork for *The Quest of Ki*, as the damsel-in-distress proved to be quite popular.

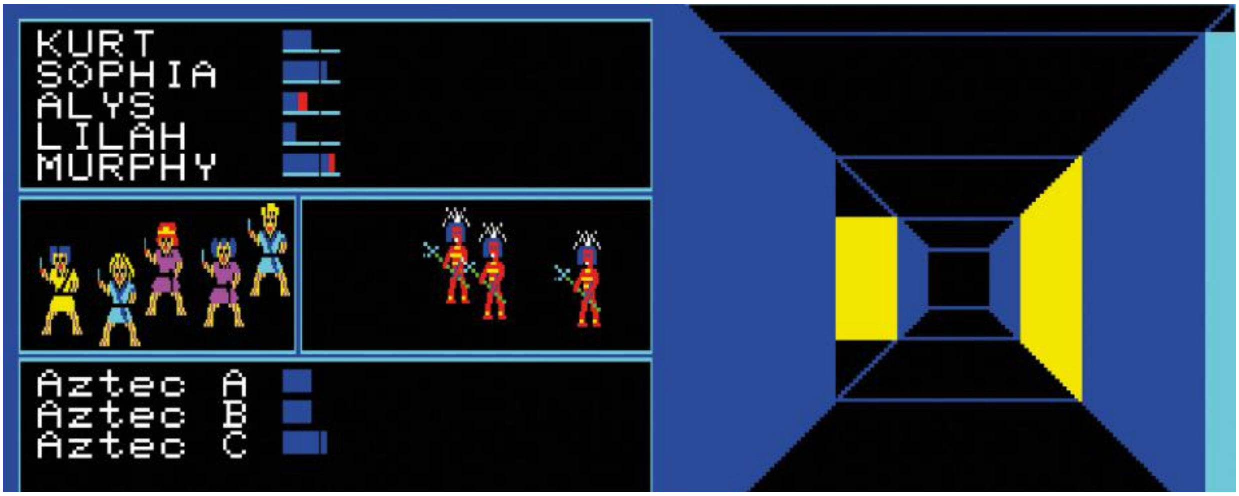
Castle Saga. *The Return of Ishtar* (1986), released in arcades, is a direct sequel, as Gil and Ki must descend the tower after being rescued. However, the layouts have changed, and indeed, it's a completely different game. There are two joysticks, one to control each character, so it either requires two players, or one player must control both Gil and Ki simultaneously. It's about as clumsy as it sounds. Gil is the only one who can attack directly, while Ki will be killed (thus ending the game) if an enemy touches her. Meanwhile, she has a variety of magic spells ... but they're limited in use, with no indication of how many times you can use them. While gamers were enamoured with the obscure charms of the original title, design choices like these led to this entry being widely ignored.

Next up was *The Quest of Ki* (1988) for the Famicom, a prequel that gives a starring role to the heroine. This is a straight-up action game, as you use her jumping powers to weave through 100 stages of incredibly difficult platforming challenges. Its design was inspired by the 1983 Atari arcade game *Major Havoc*. *The Blue Crystal Rod* (1994) is an adventure game for the Super Famicom, mostly presented from the first-person perspective. It expands the story of the world, and includes 48 different endings. Finally, *The Nightmare of Druaga: Fushigi no Dungeon* (2004) for the PlayStation 2 is a *Mystery Dungeon* game developed by Chunsoft and Arika, and is a Rogue-like.

An anime TV series was broadcast in 2008 and 2009, subtitled *The Aegis of Uruk* and *The Sword of Uruk*. The stories take place long after the adventures of Gil and Ki, so the characters are mostly new. It contains various lore from all of the previous games, and also pokes fun at various fantasy and RPG tropes.



***The Tower of Druaga* plays such a big part in the Japanese video game consciousness that it actually inspired an anime series 25 years after its initial release.**



The Black Onyx

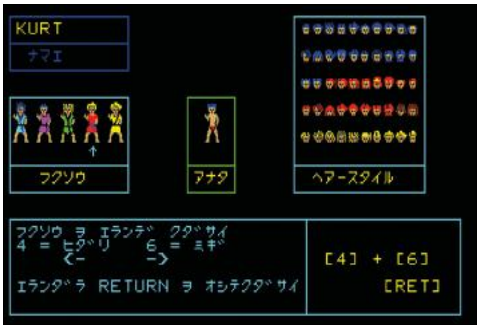
Developer: Bullet-Proof Software | Released: 1984 | Platform(s): PC88, MSX, SG1000, GBC, FC

The Black Onyx wasn't the first original RPG to be released in Japan – it was preceded by Falcom's *Panorama Tou* and Koei's *Dragon and Princess* – but it was easily the most successful. Released in early 1984 (though some sources to point to a very late 1983 release), it sold over 150,000 copies and is credited with introducing many Japanese gamers to the concept of role-playing games.

Curiously, it was not created by a Japanese developer, but rather by a Dutchman named Henk Rogers, who founded the company Bullet-Proof Software. (The company would later develop many of the ports of *Tetris*, including the Famicom version.) He had noted the popularity of *Wizardry* among Japanese gamers, but at the time, it was only playable by importing American computers and playing the game in English. (The first *Wizardry* game wasn't officially released in Japan until 1985.) Rogers figured he could create a similar game, marketed directly to the Japanese audience, somewhat simplified in order to make it a better introduction to the genre.

The story takes place in a land shrouded in perpetual darkness. At the top of a tower inside of the cursed city of Utsuro, it is said that there lies a precious gem called the Black Onyx, which could restore light to the realm. Many adventurers have attempted to explore the labyrinth that lies underground, but none have yet succeeded.

At the outset, you create a party, with up to five playable members at a time. However, you don't choose a character class, or race, or even stats, like you would in *Wizardry*. Instead, after naming them, you pick their faces from 50 choices and then their outfits. Indeed, one major difference from other first-person dungeon crawlers of the time is that your characters are actually visible on the screen, even if just in a tiny little window. Their outfits and weapons are also reflected here when you change them.



```
フクソウ ヲ エランデ゛ クタ゛サイ
4 = ヒタ゛リ   6 = ミキ゛
    <-          ->
エランタ゛ラ RETURN ヲ オシテクタ゛サイ
```

```
[4] + [6]
    [RET]
```

Your major stats are actually hidden most of the time – you actually need to visit a certain place in the town to have them revealed – and your hit points are displayed as a bar rather than numerically. During combat, your opponents' health is displayed as well, which is another rather unusual feature for the time, in games with turn–based combat. This lets you plan your attacks accordingly, since the damage calculations are pretty simple.

Indeed, much about *The Black Onyx* is fairly straightforward, since it was meant as a simplified counterpart to *Wizardry*. When it comes to fighting, all you can do is choose which other character to attack, with no other special abilities or magic. The only way to cure yourself is through drugs, which are limited in number, or by returning to the doctor's office in town. However, just because it's less complicated than other RPGs of the time, doesn't mean that it's easy. It is still very much a game where you can get lost easily, or get wiped out at a moment's notice.

MSX
The BLACK ONYX
ASCII

***The Black Onyx* isn't the first Japanese RPG, but it is one of the most well-known of the early batch, even beating the localised *Wizardry* games to the market.**

Before engaging other characters, you can attempt to talk to them. If you have the space, they may join you as well – these replacements are very handy, since if a character dies, there's no way to resurrect them. Many of the folks you find wandering about are also more powerful than the ones you can initially create. The names for the human characters are randomly generated in English, so they all tend to sound pretty ridiculous.

The Black Onyx is also a little different from *Wizardry* in that you can actually explore the town, instead of it just being represented by a series of menus. There are actually three different entrances to the six-level labyrinth, two being hidden, which bring you down to different areas. The game is also well known for the cryptic phrase "iro ikkai zutsu" ("one colour each"), a clue to solving a colour-based maze on the lowest floor.

The game was also developed with sequels in mind, as seemingly, they were unable to implement all their plans, due to memory (and/or time) constraints. As a result, a few areas – the temple, the gate, and the arena – are off-limits in the original game. It wasn't until the sequel, *The Fire Crystal*, that you could finally visit the temple. This has six brand new floors to explore, plus a second character class, magician, which lets you use magic. Otherwise, it feels more like an expansion than a sequel, despite being a standalone product. A third game, called *The Moonstone*, was planned, which would have let you explore the world outside of Utsuro. Though screenshots were released, the game was ultimately cancelled after development difficulties. A fourth game, called *Arena*, was also cancelled, and would have introduced player-versus-player combat.

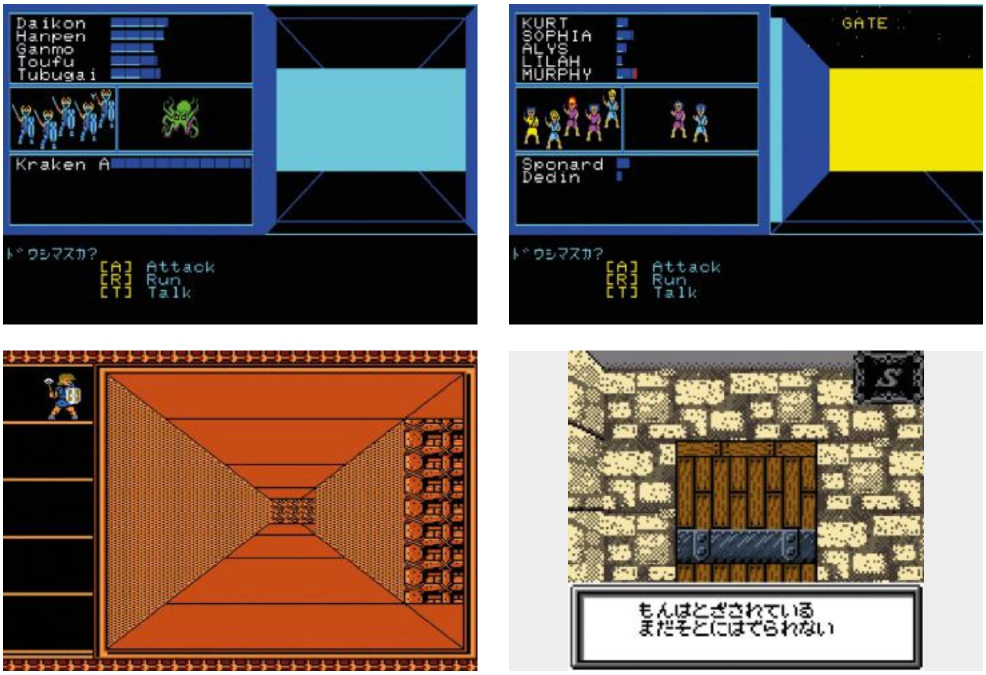
Outside of the initial run of releases on Japanese PCs, there were a handful of console ports. SEGA developed a version for the SG-1000 in 1987, the only RPG released on the console. This is the weakest-looking port, though it does have a single looping music track, compared to the occasional ditties in some of the other versions. This was translated into English and ported by fans to the ColecoVision.

BPS later (1988) made a version called *Super Black Onyx* for the Famicom, which is more of a sequel than a port. Among the changes, you can create a character class, choosing from fighter, magician, or monk. There are 12 floors, each with a different theme, and you no longer begin in town. The dungeon view is almost full-screen, while the characters are slightly bigger and more animated. Still, in spite of its changes, it's still pretty basic compared to *Wizardry*, which had been ported to the system a year prior. The game is also entirely in English, which was baffling to Japanese gamers. *The Black Onyx* was briefly resurrected in 2001 with a release for the Game Boy Color by Taito and Atelier Double. This is faithful to the original PC release, but has an added mode with updated graphics.

The Black Onyx franchise didn't last very long, simply because it was created for beginners … but as gamers became more savvy, and went on to more complicated games like *Wizardry*, it quickly became outdated. The cancellation of *The Moonstone* effectively killed the series, and the later console ports failed to impress anyone who was already familiar with games like *Dragon Quest*. Still, its legacy is undeniable, and it still stands tall in video game history.

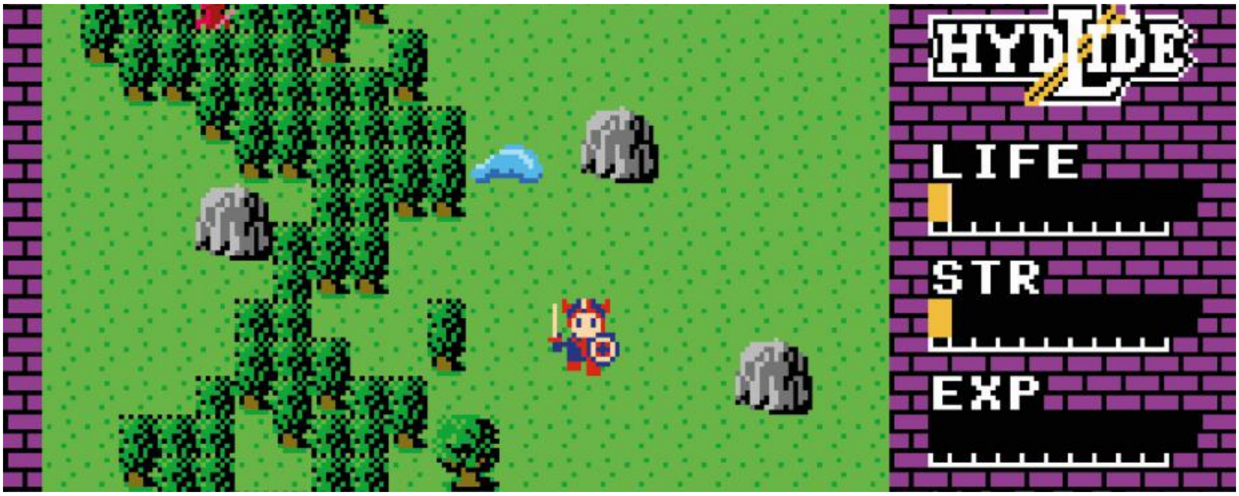
ゲームボーイ カラー専用
GAME BOY COLOR
TAITO

While *The Black Onyx* was forgotten through most of the '90s, Taito brought the series back briefly, for the Game Boy Color.



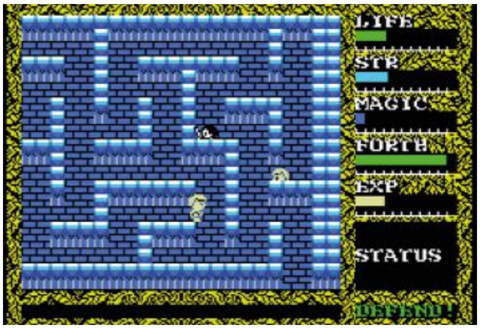
もんはとざされている
まだそとにはでられない

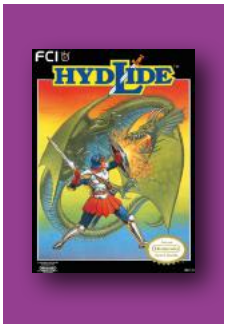
The top two screens are from the original PC release, while the bottom two are from the Famicom (left) and Game Boy Color (right) versions.



Hydlide (series)

Developer: T&E Soft | Released: 1984 | Platform(s): FM7, MSX, MSX2, NES, PC60, PC88, PC98, GEN, WIN





The NES version of *Hydlide* made it to North America in 1989, released by FCI, where it was lambasted by critics and seen as a joke for a number of years. Of course, when placed in its proper historical context, it's something of a legend.

T&E Soft's *Hydlide* series is one of the most important and foundational in the JRPG genre. For most of the early '80s, RPGs in general were really only for hardcore players, as they required intense planning, map drawing, and other strategies that made them impenetrable to most people. The first *Hydlide* game, released in late 1984, is more approachable – the world is fairly small and easy to explore, there are few stats to keep track of, and the combat is action-based so it's easy for newcomers to understand. It's also less intimidating than other action RPGs of the time, such as brutal games from Falcom like *Dragon Slayer* and *Xanadu*. In other words, *Hydlide* set down the template for better-known games, like *Ys* and, perhaps even more importantly, Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda*. The series was pioneered by Tokihiro Naitou, who credited Namco's arcade game *The Tower of Druaga* as his inspiration. Before *Hydlide*'s development, Naitou had no familiarity with either Western or Japanese RPGs.

The story takes place in Fairyland, a realm where humans and fairies coexist. In the first game, the demon Varalys has awoken, and cursed the Princess Anne to be transformed into three fairies and scattered throughout the land. A hero named Jim is tasked with rescuing all of these fairies, and defeating Varalys.

The map in the original *Hydlide* is pretty small, with the overworld consisting of 5 × 5 screens, with five small underground segments that link parts of the map. (Compare this to the original *The Legend of Zelda*, in which it's 16 × 8, not including the many dungeons). There are no towns or NPCs, so determining the goals requires either reading the manual or exploring ... and exploring typically means pushing up against everything and anything in hopes of finding something hidden. You'll need to find the three fairies, of course, with the first task being to find a cross and then take down the nearby vampire. If you know what you're doing, you can beat the game in about 30 minutes.

There is no direct attack button; instead you fight enemies by bumping into them. Whether you inflict damage or get hurt depends on both your stats and your foe's, but your odds of succeeding are higher if you attack from one side or from behind. You can also switch from Attack to Defence mode if you'd rather protect yourself from harm than fight. There are few items and no gold, but you do gain levels when you beat enough enemies. Standing still for a few moments will also cause your health to regenerate. The NES port also has a few magic spells, a feature imported from *Hydlide II*.

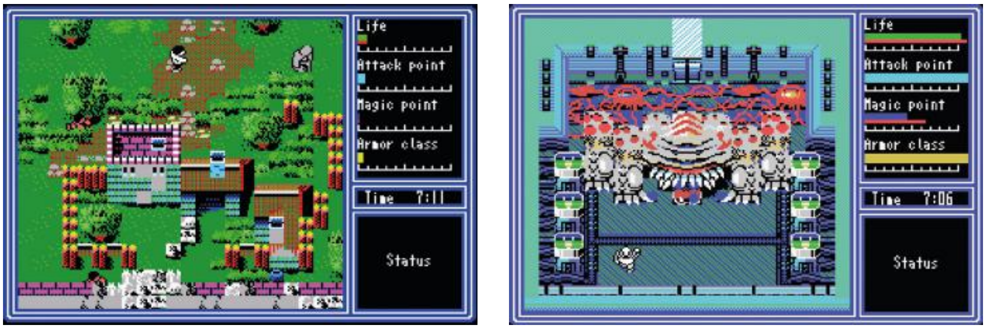
Across the many computer platforms, as well as the Famicom port, the original *Hydlide* sold over two million copies, making it an outstanding hit. It was also one of the few early JRPGs to make it outside of Japan, as the MSX2 version was released in Europe, and the NES version made it to North America. However, its international reception was much more frigid. The NES release didn't come out until 1989, nearly five years after its initial computer release, and it was horrendously outdated when compared to *The Legend of Zelda*. While it was considered relatively approachable at the time, its vague direction, harsh balance, small overworld, and lack of an attack button made it immensely clumsy to play. Moreover, it looked ugly and had only one song, imported from the PC version of *Hydlide II*, which sounded an awful lot like a chipper version of the Indiana Jones theme. It was widely derided, and become something of a joke among NES fans.

Hydlide II is a much more expansive game, which has a larger overworld, a few towns, NPCs you can chat with, and money to purchase items. In other words, it has a lot more traditional RPG elements. In addition to magic spells, there's also a training program to build up your stats, plus a morality system, in which your FORTH goes up when you kill bad monsters and goes down when you kill innocents or otherwise "good" characters. This was similar to the karma system found in RPGs like *Xanadu*. This version was only released on PCs and was not ported to consoles.

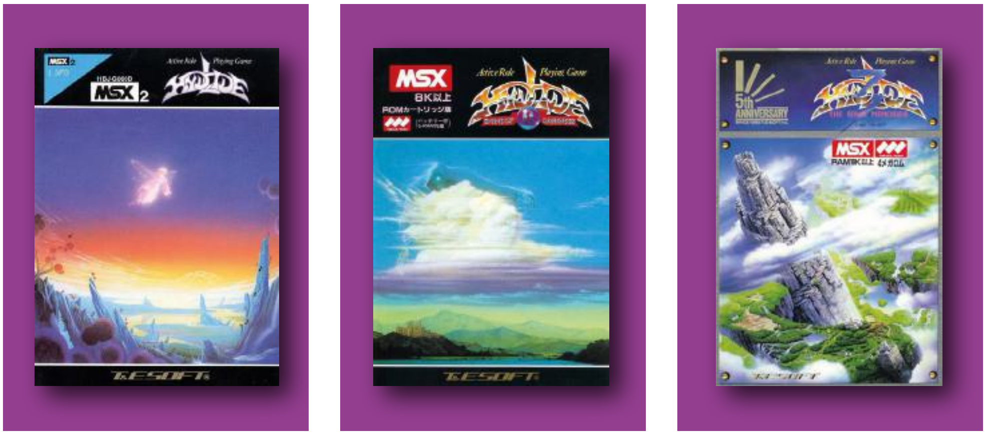
The main *Hydlide* trilogy ends with the third game, subtitled *The Space Memories*. The storytelling here, related in a brief prologue, is a little more ambitious, telling of how a fissure opened in deep space and allowed demons to spread over the land. There are four character classes to choose from – Fighter, Thief, Monk, and Cleric – each with different abilities and weighting towards mêlée fighting or spell casting. There's a time system, which flows between days and nights, and you need to keep your warrior fed and rested or their performance will degrade. There's also a weight system that disallows you from carrying too much stuff, plus the morality system from the previous game. There's an actual attack button too, so you no longer need to bump into enemies. This game also introduces boss fights. Finally, there's a twist ending that falls into sci-fi territory, as the final foe is a five-eyed being named Kaizack, who created the entire universe and has decided to destroy it now it's grown too large for him to handle. So it's basically a variation of the "killing god" scenario that's common to many JRPGs.

Hydlide III was ported to the Famicom and the Mega Drive, with the 16-bit port released in North America and Europe as *Super Hydlide*. While it's much more advanced than the first game, it's still rather difficult to play, and since it is basically an 8-bit computer game, it felt pretty outdated on these consoles. At least the music in this version is pretty good. An American PC port was planned by Kyodai, who also brought a few other Japanese PC games to the West, like *Psychic War* and the first *Ys*, but the plans fell through and it was never completed.

All three games were also ported to Windows in 1999, in celebration of the series' 15th anniversary; this edition included the original PC88 versions with new and updated graphics.



***Hydlide* starts off as a typical fantasy but ventures off into strange sci-fi as it goes along, though this trajectory is not unlike some of the original *Ultima* games.**



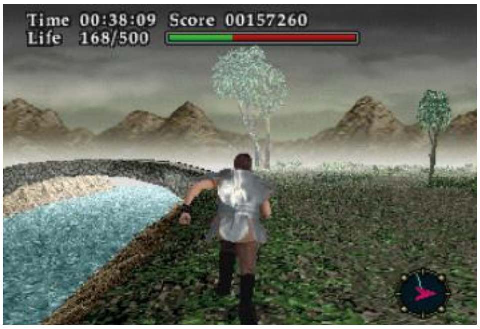
The Japanese covers for *Hydlide* were almost certainly inspired by the album artwork for prog rock band Yes, illustrated by Roger Dean.

Virtual Hydlide

Developer: T&E Soft | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SAT

Hydlide's time in the limelight may have been in the '80s, but T&E Soft brought the property into the 32-bit era with *Virtual Hydlide* for the SEGA Saturn, which was published internationally by Atlus. Conceptually, it's a pretty interesting idea – it's basically a remake of the original *Hydlide*, but the entire game world is not only much bigger but also randomly generated from a handful of preset overworld maps and dungeons each time you play. So you go through many of the same basic beats (find three fairies, fight a vampire, etc.) and it can be beaten in a few hours maximum, but theoretically you'd need to play it many times over to see everything. It also grants you a password in case you want to revisit specific worlds.

Unfortunately, in practice, nothing about it works. This style of RPG just wasn't what the modern audience was looking for, as they'd become accustomed to long-form adventures with a strong story and characters. Even divorced from that, from a technical standpoint, it's a disaster. The game world is rendered in 3D, but the frame rate is atrocious and the controls awkward – these were common issues at the time, especially in the era before analogue control sticks, but it's even worse than usual here. The sprites are 2D, with the main character actually being a digitised actor. Even though arcade games like *Mortal Kombat* could make this work, in a 1995 title it looked incredibly silly, especially with all of the ridiculously shiny fantasy armour you can equip him with. Still, altogether it creates one of the best kinds of noble failure, the kind that is ambitious and seemingly unaware of its obvious failings, but tries its damn hardest anyway.



SEGA SATURN
VIRTUAL HYDLIDE

Virtual Hydlide was rushed to the market so it could claim to be the first RPG for the Saturn. The numerous technical issues and silly character visuals further mar the game.

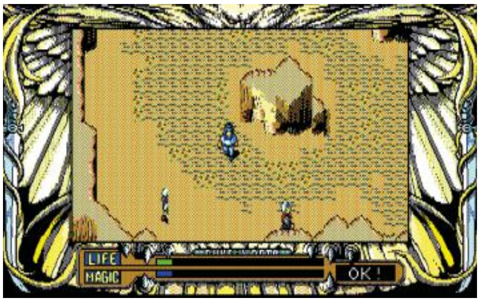
Rune Worth (series)

Developer: T&E Soft | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): MSX2, X68, PC88, PC98

After the *Hydlide* series, T&E Soft followed them up with the *Rune Worth* series of games. In this game world, gods and humans coexist. The intro cinematics illustrate how the kingdom of Saris was invaded by the neighbouring Bachmane Empire, ostensibly for some kind of holy power it possesses. You control a young boy, the sole survivor from a mountain bandit tribe that was massacred by a mysterious man more than a decade after the invasion; he eventually learns how these events are connected.

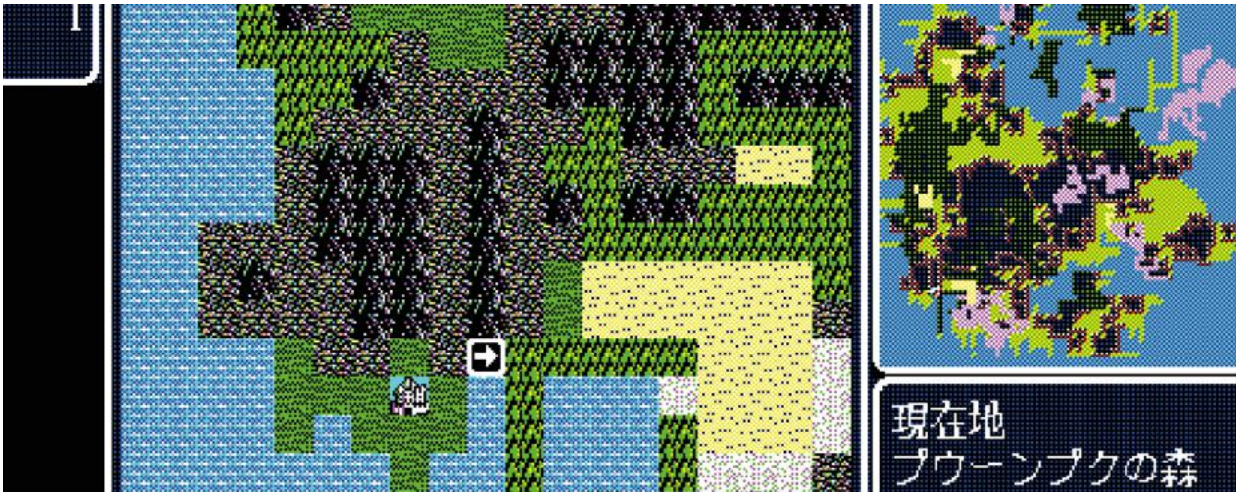
Much as *Ys* was inspired by *Hydlide*, *Rune Worth* pays back the favour by looking and feeling like *Ys*, though it's still a different beast – there's an actual attack button now, instead of just ramming into bad guys. There is no experience system, and instead you collect items found in treasure chests located in each area. It seems like a unique concept, since you grow more powerful by exploring rather than grinding, but in practice, the balance is off, so enemies often overpower you, and there's no recourse other than running away. Plus, without any rewards, there's no satisfaction in combat.

Rune Worth was also packaged with an extraordinarily detailed tome that explains the creation myths, religions, geography, magic systems, and history of the land. Unfortunately, very little of this is reflected in the game itself – it's more elaborate than the *Hydlide* games but still only a fraction of what it should be. You do need to reference the book in a few cases, seemingly as a form of copy-protection, but it ends up feeling like a huge waste. The first game was released on a variety of platforms, while the two sequels were only released on the PC98.



Rune Worth
黒衣の貴公子

While not taking place in the same world, _Rune Worth_ is the spiritual successor to the _Hydlide_ games.



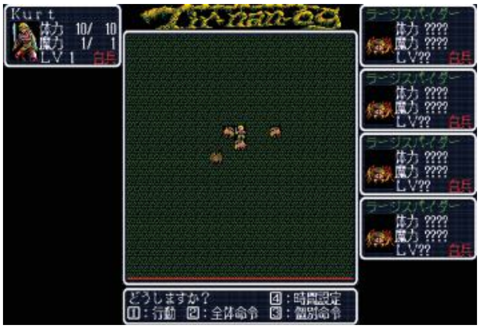
Tir Na Nog (series)

Developer: SystemSoft | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, MSX2, WIN, PS2

SystemSoft was a publisher that put out quite a few simulation games, including the genre-defining *Daisenryaku* series and its fantasy spinoff, *Master of Monsters*. They also dabbled a bit in RPGs, primarily with their *Tir Na Nog* series. Unrelated to the graphic adventures by Gargoyle Games, it's an RPG very similar to Origin's *Ultima* series, though focusing on Celtic mythology. In its write-up, Project EGG's website indicates that Celtic lore was fairly unknown in Japan at the time, and this series helped introduce it to computer game fans.

There are two main games in the series: the first, subtitled *Kindan no Tou* ("The Forbidden Tower") and the second, *Chaos no Keishou* ("The Chaos Bell"). There was also an exclusive release on the MSX2 without a subtitle, though this is based on the second game. You control a heroic fairy who has to save the world of Tir Na Nog, and can draft friends at a bar, or even convince enemy monsters to join you.

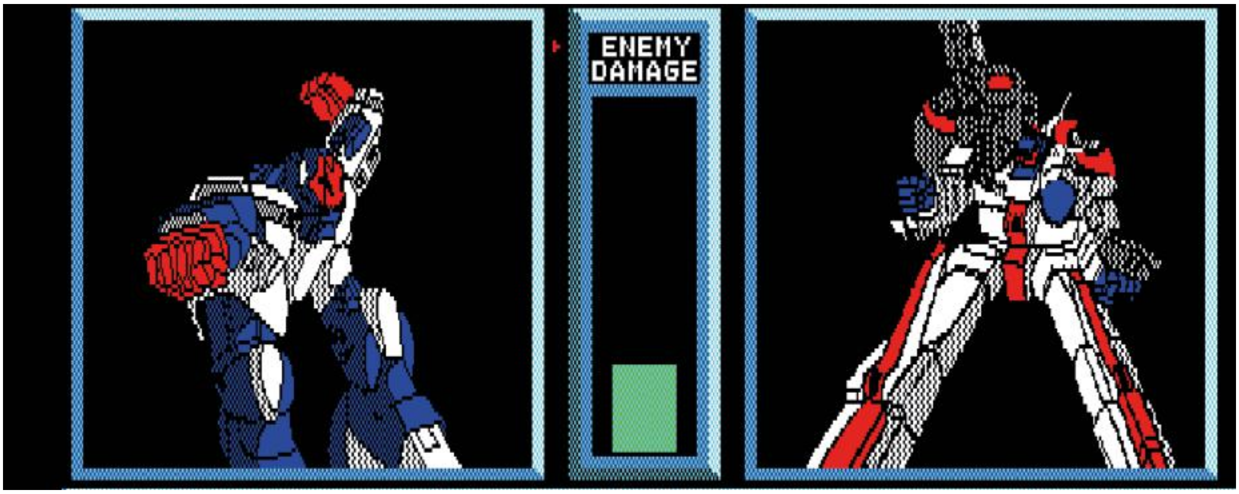
For a game developed in 1987, *Tir Na Nog*'s graphics are incredibly simple, presented using a vastly zoomed-out camera and tiny characters. There are towns and castles in the overworld, though when you enter them, they're just presented as a series of menus. There are also caves, which are dark, allowing only a limited range of view. The battles look like *Ultima III*, taking place on a separate overhead screen, on which the combatants move towards each other and trade blows. However, the mechanics are simplified, as you don't need to directly move your characters; you can just choose a target and have them automatically head towards a target to engage, or even just rely on autobattle. A sequel, released the following year (1988), has some slightly improved visuals, as well as other enhancements, like town maps and an actual soundtrack.



The main draw of each game, however, is its automatic scenario generator. When you begin a new game, a whole new world is generated, creating unique landscapes to explore, as well as different goals, like rescuing someone or killing monsters. (The creation time depends on the PC model, anywhere from 15 to 45 minutes.) It also gives you a code for that world, allowing you to revisit it in case you reset it, or trade with another player. Much of the series simplicity is based on the fact that everything is procedurally generated, but it also presents games that can be played infinitely, with over a billion possible worlds.

SystemSoft also developed a spinoff called *Bretonne Lais* for the X68000, in 1990. The visuals here are a little more detailed. Rather than having an automatic generator, it enables the player to create their own scenario. There's only a handful of short chapters included, but at the time of release, there was a contest held for submissions, with the winners being released to the wider public. The *Tir Na Nog* series continued with several entries for Windows, including a remake of the first game, with the fifth entry also being released on the PlayStation 2 and PSP.

***Tir Na Nog* promised limitless adventures, with a system that randomly generated the world as well as its various quests.**



Cruise Chaser Blassty

Developer: Square | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, X1

Square's first role-playing game, *Cruise Chaser Blassty*, sure has a lot going for it. For starters, it eschews fantasy traditions for a sci-fi flavour, as you pilot a gigantic transforming mecha called the Blassty. The robot designs were provided by Nippon Sunrise, the production company behind the tremendously popular *Gundam* series. (They were initially created for an animated feature that didn't really go anywhere.)

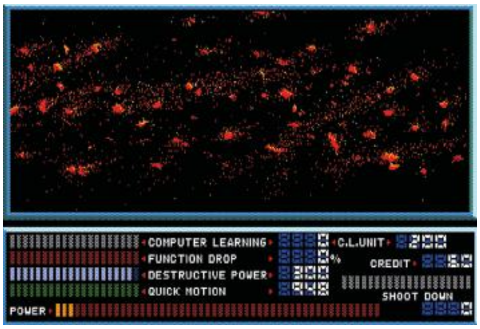
And Square really does put them to good use. The main draw of the game lies with its brilliantly animated combat sequences. Many turn-based RPGs show their combatants as static images, but here, every attack of both warriors – sword swipes, missile barrages, explosions, and so forth – is smoothly presented. The first time you see it in action, it looks incredible.

Unfortunately, this being an RPG, you see these same animations over and over, and they quickly grow tiresome. And at that point, the shallowness of the game shows through – given the number of frames that needed to be drawn, there are only eight real enemy types (plus some palette swaps). Combat is simple: you pick from one of four commands, queuing up three in a row, then sit back and watch as they're executed. Fights are one-on-one, and there's little strategy.

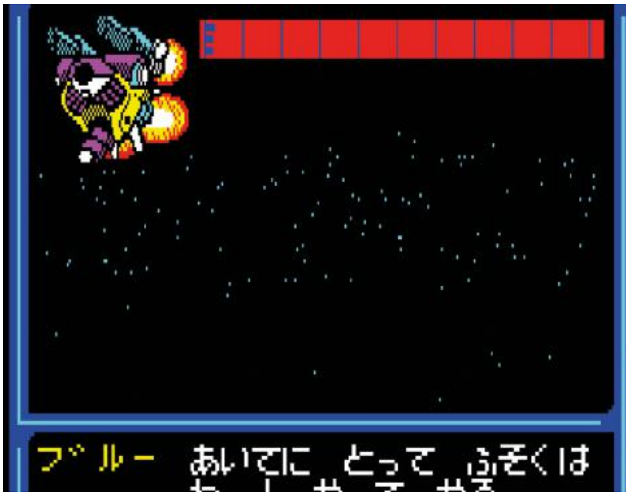
But there are far bigger issues than the combat. The game is presented from a first-person perspective, but since you're flying in outer space, you can't see much of anything other than stars. Even walls (presented as fields of anti-matter) can only be seen when you're right in front of them. Essential navigation tools like the compass or coordinate display are relegated to hidden commands. In the initial PC88 version, the scrolling is confusing too – if you turn right or left, it appears that you're flying forward, even though you're not. It's so disorienting that they had to fix this for the later PC98 version. Combined with the fact that you can easily run out of energy and die, the game becomes nigh unplayable. It's a shame, because there are a lot of cool ideas. The game world is made up of several small, stratified dimensions, surrounded by anti-matter – essentially the "floors" of the "dungeon", which you travel between via warp gates. You control a soldier who fights for the Commune, the organisation that controls these universes. But as the game progresses, you can choose to turn against them, allowing for two endings. The story was an early work by *Final Fantasy* director Hironobu Sakaguchi.

Square referenced the Blassty in later games, first as a summon named Ark in *Final Fantasy IX*, then as a boss just called Cruise Chaser in *Final Fantasy XIV*. There were also novels and model kits based on the original mecha designs, though they have nothing to do with Square's game.

Square continued with a few more RPGs, like the PC88/98 game *Genesis: Beyond the Revelation* and the Famicom Disk System game *Cleopatra no Mahou*, before striking it big with *Final Fantasy*.



The animation in *Cruise Chaser Blasty* is incredible, but also drawn-out and repetitive. Square didn't quite learn its lesson, as the same criticism can be levelled to the Summon spells in later *Final Fantasy* games.



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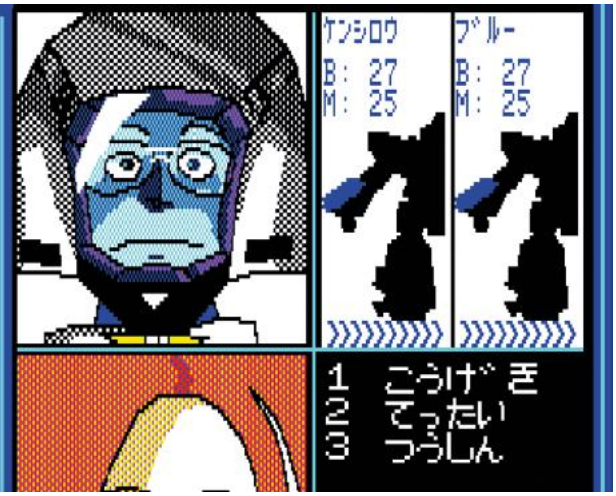


Chikyuu Senshi Rayieza

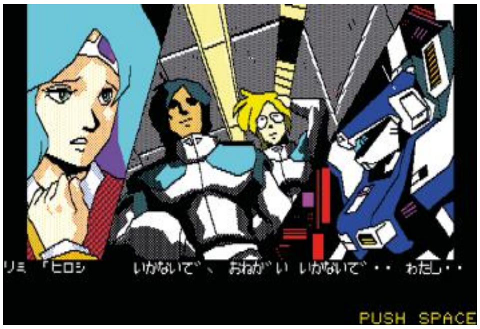
Developer: Enix | Released: 1985 | Platform(s): FM7, MSX, PC88, X1, FC

Enix is known for its massively influential *Dragon Quest* series, but its first RPG was actually the PC game *Chikyuu Senshi Rayieza* ("Earth Warrior Rayieza"). It's one of the rare RPGs to feature a sci-fi setting, rather than the fantasy worlds featured in most of these types of games. It could be compared to Square's *Cruise Chaser Blassty*, released a year later, and while it's not nearly as flashy, it is a better game.

The story takes place in the year 2300, when Earth is under attack by the evil Garm empire. You control an unnamed pilot fighting for Earth, who is teamed with a fellow soldier named Blue, as you both jet around the galaxy in your Rayieza mechas. At the beginning, you discover a mysterious girl named Rimi, in hypersleep, who has lost her memory but stays on Earth and lends her ESP powers to the fight against the Garm.

You move through space by choosing a destination on a map. Once the distance is calculated, you travel using a certain number of "jumps", though you can be attacked between them. You can extend the range of these jumps, which in turn lets you reach destinations faster, though this can damage your mecha. The battles are straightforward turn-based affairs, as you use beams or more powerful (but numerically limited) missiles, or attack with mêlée strikes. The first half of the game takes place in Earth's solar system, while the second half puts you into uncharted Garm territory. Much of the game is spent fighting against enemy forces while visiting outposts to replenish your ammunition.

The story seems basic during gameplay, but it has a rather famously tragic ending. Blue sacrifices himself to defeat the Garm emperor, while Rimi is revealed to be not only the emperor's sister, but also an unknowing sleeper agent containing a virus that will wipe out everyone on Earth, so the hero must shoot her to save humanity. Quite the downer, indeed!



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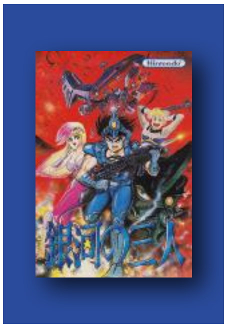
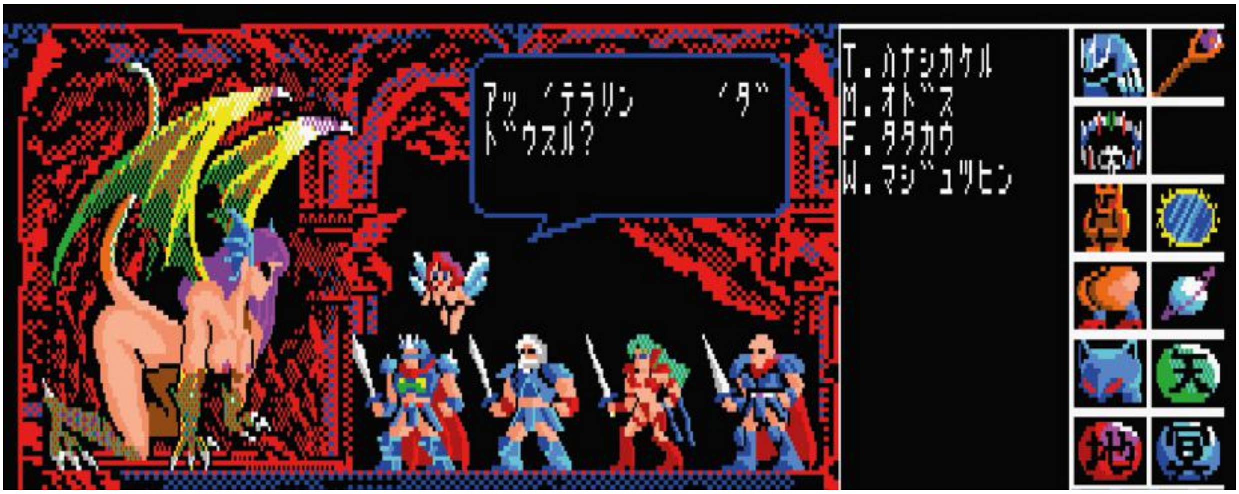
Rather unusually, Nintendo licensed this game for release on the Famicom in 1987, renaming it *Ginga no Sannin* ("The Galactic Trio"). This version has redrawn character artwork, including a cover by famous manga artist Go Nagai. The PC version is silent for most of the game, but this version has a new soundtrack by Yellow Magic Orchestra member Yukihiro Takahashi, who provided a battle theme that sounds an awful lot like their song "Rydeen". The battle system has been greatly retooled, so there are many more types of weapon to purchase (it still uses bullets and missiles, though the mêlée attacks have been mostly removed). Plus, Rimi plays a more active role in combat – she's still stationed on Earth, but she uses her psychic powers to debilitate foes. There are also side-scrolling sections in which you explore the various planets.

Time has mostly forgotten this game, as it can be quite tedious even for an 8-bit RPG, but it's an interesting title from before RPG conventions were really established.



Go Nagai is a well respected artist, but his cover art for Nintendo's Famicom conversion, *Ginga no Sannin,* looks wildly out of place.



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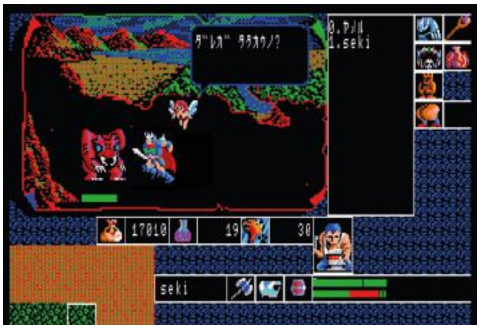
Miracle Warriors

Developer: Kogado/ASCII/SEGA | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): FM7, X1, PC88, PC98, MSX, FC, SMS

Kogado was a Japanese developer that had a reputation for hardcore simulation games like *Schwarzchild* and *Power Dolls*. Prior to any of these, they created *Haja no Fuuin* ("Seal of Evil", also known as *Miracle Warriors*). As far as setups go, it's pretty typical – you're commanded by the king to defeat the demon queen Terarin (the naked female gargoyle on the cover), who's summoned monsters to the land. Though you start the adventure alone, you can find three companions: Guy, a fearsome warrior; Medi, a female warrior who works as a dancer; and Treo (Tremos in the Japanese version), a hulking, axe-wielding pirate. The names of many places and items are references to Greek mythology.

In the original PC versions, there's no on-screen overworld map. Most of the screen is taken up by a huge window that represents the player's viewpoint, while your character(s) appear motionless, sitting on the bottom of the window frame. Whenever you move, the horizon slowly moves, giving the appearance that you're actually moving. To help you get your bearings, the packaging includes a full map of the kingdom, divided into squares, with a little figurine that represents your party. In other words, you're supposed to move your token every time you move your character in the game, unless you want to just stumble around aimlessly. It's supposed to replicate the feeling of tabletop role-playing, but in practice, it's really tedious. The Famicom version dials this back a bit by giving you a small on-screen map, though it lacks in details like towns or caves. The Master System version provides a more detailed map, to the point where the physical board isn't necessary, but your range of view is pretty limited.

Combat is generally simple, though there are a few twists. In addition to the standard currency, fangs from defeated enemies can be traded for items. Defeating enemies can either increase or decrease your fame, depending on the type of enemy. Enough fame lets you enter certain villages or get extra information out of people. You lose fame if you run away from battle.



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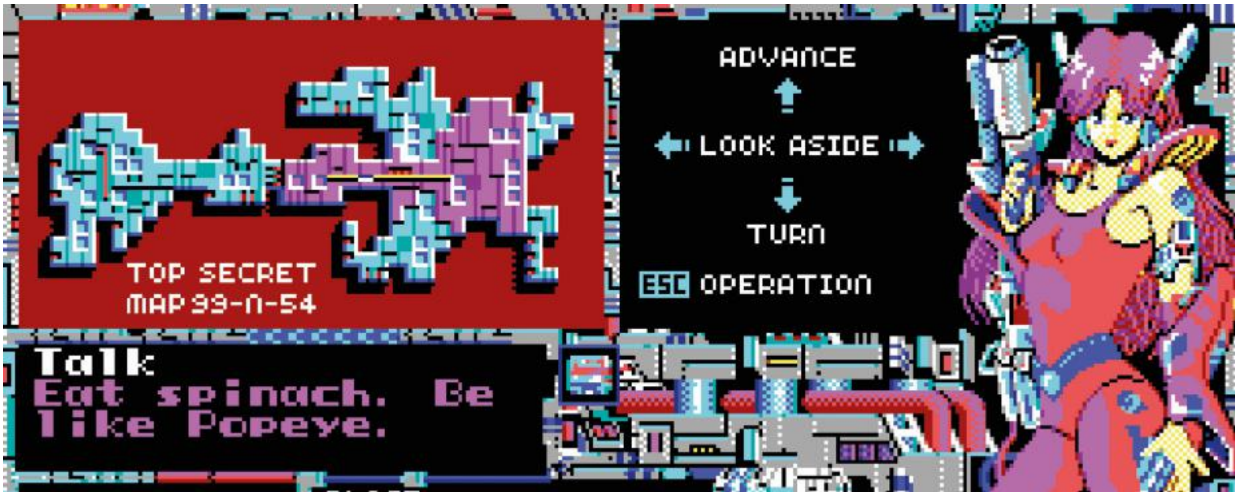
On its own, *Haja no Fuuin* is just a mild curiosity, but it's historically important, because it was the first Japanese RPG released in English, in early 1988. SEGA was hard up for content for their Master System, and thus translated nearly everything that came out of their development studios; titles like *Dragon Quest* didn't make it into English until over a year later. As far as SMS games go, though, it's outclassed by SEGA's own original title, *Phantasy Star*, but the enhancements to this port (a good soundtrack, improved visuals) make this the best version, even if the English packaging is missing the figure. A pseudo-sequel called *Algies no Tsubasa* was released only for PCs. Kogado also released a few other RPGs, including *Mashou Denki: La Valeur*, which is another traditional-style RPG, though only featuring a single character; nonetheless, it was ported to the PC Engine CD.

***Miracle Warriors* for the SEGA Master System seems to be the first Japanese RPG to have been released in English. Its American cover artwork is a redrawn version of the Japanese release, which also covers up the topless demoness.**



Talk
Eat spinach. Be like Popeye.

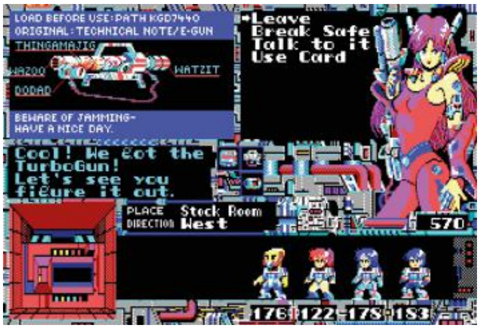
Cosmic Soldier / Psychic War

Developer: Kogado | Released: 1985 | Platform(s): FM7, MSX, PC88, PC98, X1, IBM

Kogado Studio, founded in 1916 as a print and design company, may be one of the oldest Japanese companies in the game industry. While *Miracle Warriors* is its better-known RPG, it was preceded by *Cosmic Soldier,* released in 1985 for Japanese home computers. Like many early RPGs, it leans heavily on the influence of *Wizardry* and similar western RPGs, but it differentiates itself in a few important ways. It is an early RPG to use a pure sci-fi setting, beating the venerable *Phantasy Star* to the market by two years. In *Cosmic Soldier* and its sequel, *Psychic War,* you play as a soldier (accompanied by a scantily clad android) on a mission to sabotage an evil plan being set into motion by the Quila empire.

A prominent feature of the series is the conversation system. During battle you can talk to the enemy. Your choices are to get hints from them, run away, or (sometimes) have them join your party. As recruited allies permanently die when defeated, it is important to always be building up a squad of grunts to protect your main character. It's a simpler version of the conversation system later used in the *Megami Tensei* series.

The combat in the first *Cosmic Soldier* follows a standard turn-based battle system. One unique wrinkle is the ability to choose how hard you want to hit your enemies. Choosing to use a weaker attack offers little advantage, and risks your recruited allies upon counterattack, so it is usually best to use full strength attacks. Combat in the sequel, *Psychic War,* attempts to differentiate itself from its inspirations with mixed success. Battles are a beam clash of ESP waves between you and the enemy, with you occasionally using a shield to block damage or a suction ability to absorb some ESP back. Unfortunately, while early game fights can last only seconds, later battles against enemies with hundreds of hit points often consist of holding the space bar for 30 seconds or more. Also, as enemies attack you the instant the battle starts, it is recommended to always hold the space bar down. This can create issues as allies recruited late in the game (who start with almost no health) can often be incinerated by an incautious trigger finger.



LOAD BEFORE USE:PATH KGD7440
ORIGINAL:TECHNICAL NOTE/E-GUN

BEWARE OF JAMMING-
HAVE A NICE DAY.

Cool! We got the TurboGun!
Let's see you figure it out.

PLACE Stock Room
DIRECTION West

While both games are dungeon crawlers, the game structure is fairly open-ended. Most areas are accessible immediately, with deeper progress in each area gained by finding passwords, obtaining parts for your android or Turbogun, and other assorted activities. There's even an ending sequence where you set a bomb in the enemy HQ and have to run to an escape pod before the timer runs out.

The original was a Japan-only release, but the sequel received an English translation by Kyodai. It takes a lighter, cheekier tone, which suits the game well. Characters will exclaim goofy phrases while cracking safes, passwords to later areas have been rewritten to imitate popular phrases, etc. Some naughty elements have also been toned down. For one of the earliest translated PC RPGs out there, it holds up well.

PSYCHIC WAR
SF ROLE PLAYING GAME
KOGADO

The second game in this series, *Psychic War,* is one of the few early JRPGs to be released in English on IBM PCs.

Last Armageddon

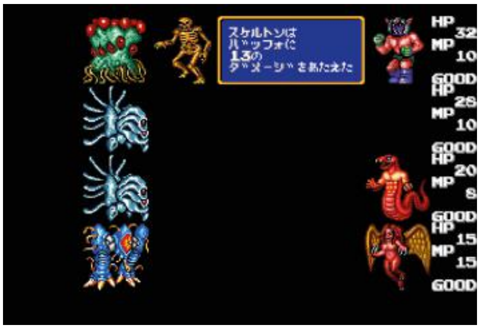
Developer: Brain Grey | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): PC98, MSX2, X1, X68, FMT, FC, PCECD

Last Armageddon takes place on the planet Earth, after humanity has destroyed itself. The mythical monsters of old, long driven into hiding underground, have returned to the surface to reclaim it for themselves. The game itself begins with a cutscene in which a skeleton and a minotaur overlook a barren wasteland. Seemingly out of nowhere, an alien appears, wielding a machine gun, shoots the minotaur with such force that it explodes, and then delivers an ultimatum to the monsters – we rule Earth now, deal with it. Fuming in their lair, the monsters draft the most powerful among them to fight back, and in doing so, not only learn the origins of the aliens, but also discover what happened to the decimated human species.

The story very much wants to be the antithesis of typical fantasy RPGs, though it still rather plays like one. You explore the world from an overhead perspective, though interiors are explored via a first-person view. Time flows from day to night, and since certain monsters are nocturnal, your roster shifts back and forth. There's also a once-a-month super-long day called Salvan, which has its own particular set of characters. Units include an orc, a gargoyle, a harpie, a cyclops, a naga, and a sphinx. They evolve over the course of the adventure, and you can actually splice in DNA from other creatures, allowing for unique variations. Stat gains work similarly to those in *Final Fantasy II*, in that you repeat specific actions to increase attack, defence, magic, and so forth.

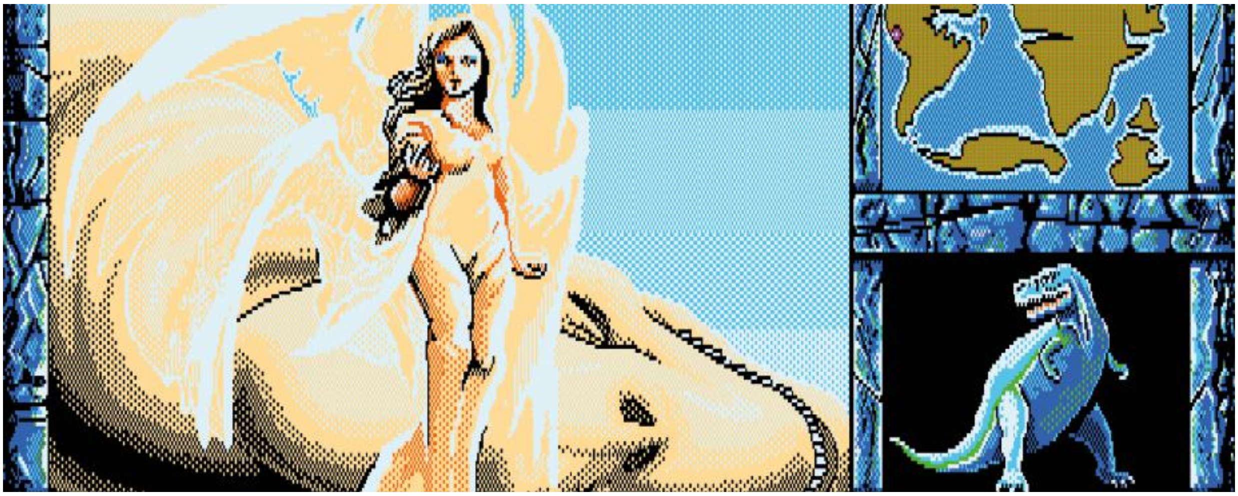
At first, the ultimate goal appears to be to read the 108 lithographs spread throughout the land, so you can enter the mystical Tower of No Return. Here, you learn about the downfall of humanity through various historical events. This is only the first half of the game though, as the monsters then find a world not too dissimilar from our own human one, just mostly deserted. The story begins to get somewhat meta here, especially as it concentrates on the nature of role-playing games themselves. Needless to say, both the crazy "monsters vs. aliens" story and its fourth-wall-aware story have granted *Last Armageddon* the rank of cult classic. The soundtrack is especially excellent too, particularly the high intensity battle theme in the PC Engine port, an early work by *Choaniki* composer Koji Hayama.

Ambitious as it is, it's still very much a late '80s RPG, with an odd combat balance and lots upon lots of wandering. Though initially released on several home computers, the later PC Engine CD and Famicom ports make things a little easier, at least in speeding up the first half of the game. Game creator Takiya Iijima developed a pseudo-sequel for the Mega CD, called *After Armageddon Gaiden*, in which you control five monsters as they explore a parallel world called Eclipse. The main gruesome gimmick is that humans still exist in this world, and eating them can allow you to evolve into all sorts of wild monsters. But otherwise there were never really any other RPGs that followed up on this title's bizarre brilliance.



スケルトンは
ハ゛ッフォに
13の
タ゛メーシ゛をあたえた

***Last Armageddon* has a wild premise that just gets more insane as it goes along, though it is hamstrung by late '80s RPG conventions, ultimately making this game better in concept than in execution.**



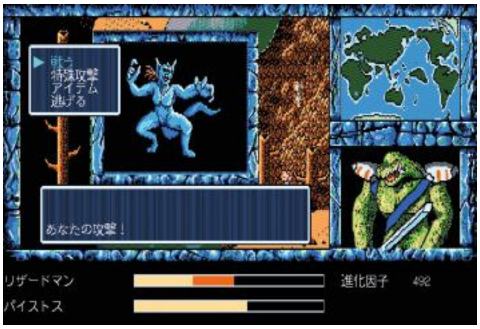
46 Okunen Monogatari (series)

Developer: Enix | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): PC98, SNES

46 Okunen Monogatari: The Shinkaron ("The 4.6-Billion-Year Story: The Evolution") takes place at the beginning of life on an earth-like planet. You are merely a fish, struggling to survive against predators in the ocean. However, when you fight and beat an enemy, you'll gain an evolution point, which can be allocated to one of four statistics. Depending on how you spend these points, you can evolve into different, more complex creatures. However, not all evolution is advantageous, and certain forms will be doomed to extinction, but if you evolve properly, you'll fast forward to a new era. As the game progresses, you take the roles of amphibians, reptiles, dinosaurs, mammals, and eventually humans.

Conceived by Japanese novelist Chiaki Kawamata, the game may be inspired by Darwinism, but it also has plenty of fantasy, religious, and science fiction elements. Many of the creatures are based on real ones, but others are fictional, and the humans that show up near the end of the game are closer to elves than regular humans. From the beginning, you are watched over by the earth goddess Gaia, represented as a beautiful woman with flowing blue/green hair, who is opposed by Lucifer, represented as a Marilyn Monroe-esque villainess. Early on, you'll be guided by a race of aliens from the moon, called Lunarians, who later establish themselves in the city of Atlantis.

The game was developed by Enix, who had largely moved onto console platforms following the success of *Dragon Quest*, but before that, their primary strength was adventure games. That lineage heavily influenced *46 Okunen Monogatari*, especially in terms of the impressively gorgeous artwork that illustrates the many environments and the strange lifeforms that inhabit it. As an RPG, it is fairly straightforward, as fights are one-on-one, and the evolution system is more of a puzzle to figure out than a method of character customisation. But it also has an unusual sense of humour, particularly in how dead-end evolutionary paths end. Evolve into an elephant and you'll end up in the circus; evolve into Godzilla and you'll wreck Tokyo.



あなたの攻撃！

This entry was never ported outside of its initial PC98 release, though its concept lived on in the SNES sequel, which was known internationally as *EVO: Search for Eden*. The idea is the same: you start as just a mere fish swimming through the sea, defeating enemies and evolving into new forms. However, it's switched from a pure RPG to a side-scrolling action RPG. The forms into which you evolve are more customisable, and unlike the initial game, there are no "wrong" answers either. The eras you go through are mostly similar too, as you can evolve into dinosaurs and eventually humans. However, the wild, pseudo-biblical story of good versus evil has been canned, as the plot is barely present. In spite of that, it's still an unusual title, and both have gone on to become minor classics.

46億年物語
THE進化論

This unusual sci-fi RPG is more fiction than science, but sends your epoch-spanning spirit through some pretty wild adventures as you protect the planet from evil.

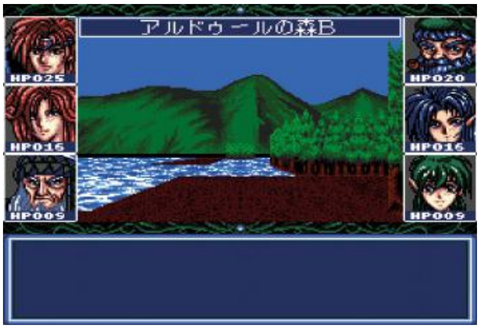
Arcus (series)

Developer: Wolf Team | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, MSX2, MCD

Wolf Team began as a part of Telenet, before spinning off into a separate company. One of its first works was *Arcus,* a trilogy of RPGs with a relatively strong focus on story. The first game puts you in the role of fighter Jedah Chaffas, who must save the land of Arcusas and hunt down the golden dragon Rig Vearda. During your adventures, you'll come across a six-year-old half-elf named Pikto Anexios Pionto, who grows up and becomes the main character for the second and third games.

As originally released on computer platforms, the first and third *Arcus* games are viewed entirely from the first-person perspective. The second, subtitled *Silent Symphony,* uses an overhead perspective, though battles are still first-person. It takes some inspiration from the *Might & Magic* games, in that your explorations are not confined totally to dungeons, as you'll also visit forests, canyons and other areas. Combat retains the armour class system of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons,* though in other ways, it's similar to *Wizardry,* though much simplified. There is no character creation; instead, other party members join you as part of the story. In the original PC versions, there is no experience or level progress at all – there seems to be a hidden stat such that repeatedly fighting a type of monster will eventually make you stronger against it, but that's about it. There is no equipment, and gold is only found in treasure chests, but ultimately there's not much use for it other than buying healing items. You do lose stamina, which weakens your fighting ability, though you can find safe places to rest and replenish it

The trilogy was later remade and bundled together for a Japan-only Mega CD release, which standardises all three games into the first-person perspective. It redesigns all of the characters to make them consistent across the trilogy, and they look fantastic. It also adds a number of voiced cutscenes with fantastic animation – along with those in *Annet Futatabi,* another Mega CD game by the same developer, they're some of the best-looking on the platform. This version adds in experience and equipment, making it feel a little more like a regular RPG, plus an automap function.



While none of the main series was ever localised, there is an action RPG spinoff called *Arcus Odyssey,* the Genesis port of which made it into English. While it features characters like Jedah and his warrior maiden friend Erin Gashuna, the focus is on arcade-style action, and the story is thin. Functionally, it plays a little like *Gauntlet,* viewed from an overhead perspective, with different character types having different skills. As with Telenet's *Valis* series, the rights were sold to the adult game company Eants, who created an 18+ rated adventure game called *Arcus X,* which is the last entry in the series. *Arcus* is part of a larger shared universe with other Telenet games, including the adventure game *Gaudi: Barcelona no Kaze,* the action series *Final Zone,* and the fantasy-themed shoot-'em-up *Mid-garts.*

Telenet's RPGs tend to have fancy graphics and character designs but mediocre gameplay, and to some extent, that applies to the *Arcus* games as well.

Exile (series)

Developer: Telenet | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, MSX2, X1, TGCD, GEN

Two of the three *XZR*/*Exile* games were released in English, though they tone down the craziness of the first game, which was released only on Japanese computers.

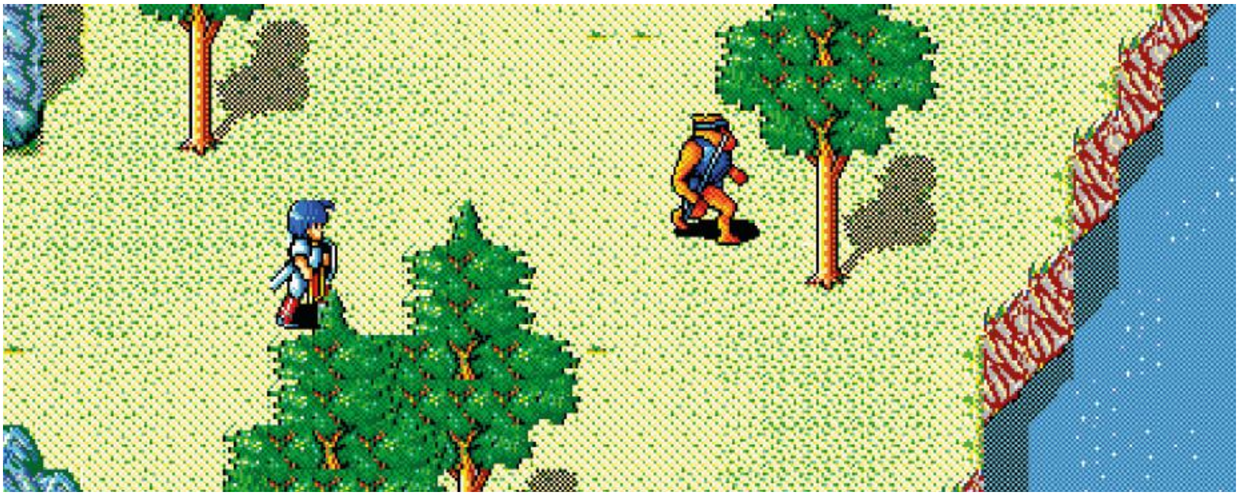
XZR is a series as subversive as it is obscure. First brought to life on Japanese computers in 1988, each game stars the anti-hero Sadler, a Syrian Hashishin, an assassin disciple of Hassan-i Sabbah, as he fights to end oppression and bring about revolution in 12th century Syria. *Assassin's Creed* touches on similar territory, but it sure never cast you as a Shia Muslim eventually sent to the future to kill both Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan.

Based on the apocryphal legend that Sabbah controlled the Hashishin through liberal distribution of hashish, Sadler is aided in his quest by everything from alcohol to heroin. Drugs heal HP or buff stats, but overdosing can cause cardiac arrest and game over. Each game follows the same general gameplay format: Sadler explores towns from a top-down perspective, meeting several historical figures along the way, while dungeons transition you to side-scrolling action. None of the *XZR* games are remotely well-balanced, but *XZR* is to be experienced for its madcap stories.

The first game, *Idols of Apostate* concerns Sadler's journey to destroy an oppressive Caliphate. Joining him are Rumi, his genius teenage love interest; Fakhyle, an elderly sorcerer; Kindhi, a learning-disabled strongman; and Sufrawaldhi, a scientist who operates in the underground. After a trek across the Middle East, he eventually assassinates the Caliph, who turns out to be his biological father. It's at this point that *XZR* takes a hard swerve into the surreal and controversial, with the aforementioned time travel plot.

XZR II is the true gem of the series. Initially released on computers, it received remakes for the Genesis and TurboGrafx-CD in 1991, which were known as *Exile* internationally. All versions of *XZR II* are immediate sequels that follow the same basic structure, though the remake eschews the Cold War arc, picking up after the Caliph's assassination. Sadler and his party are hiding out in the desert, when a local man warns Sadler that he's spotted the Knights Templar's scouts. Sadler soon finds himself in uneasy alliance with Grandmaster Hugues de Payens, who claims a desire to put a stop to the Crusades. To do this, Payens wishes to locate the Holimax, an artefact capable of ending holy war forever. The story daringly ends with Sadler, having lost everyone he loves, in a state of existential crisis.

Wicked Phenomenon, only released for the TurboGrafx-CD, is easily the black sheep of the series: Sadler is now off to fight the embodiment of all evil. His party's back to help him, explaining that they never actually died, which negates some of the emotional heft of the previous game. They're actually playable too: Rumi favours speed; Kindhi, power; and Fakhyle, range; with Sadler being the all-rounder. They're also joined by Lawrence, an antagonist who sees the light. It ends on a monologue about the Power of Friendship, which is very out of character. The Working Designs-published English release is notoriously unbalanced, as regular monsters have tons of HP and can one-shot Sadler.



Xak (series)

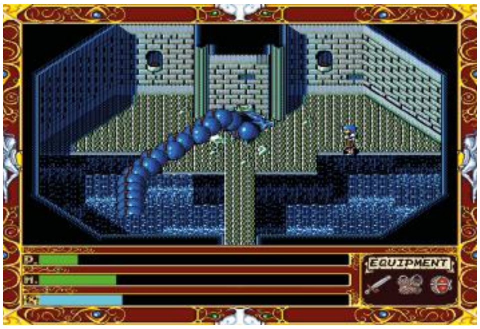
Developer: Micro Cabin | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, MSX2, FMT, X68, PCECD, SFC

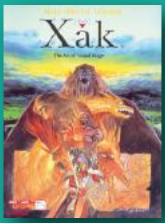
Micro Cabin was a developer virtually unknown outside of Japan. Of all its varied titles, *Xak* was undoubtedly their flagship series, and given how many entries it received, it's a shame that it never made its way outside Japan.

The Twilight of the Gods, 750 years ago allowed demons to rise up. Ravaging the world, the gods, with the last of their power, chose to split the world into three different planes: Xak, the human world; Oceanity, the world of the fae; and Xexis, the demon world. All returned to peace, until 500 years later, when the demon lord Badu led a war of conquest against Xak and Oceanity. The warrior Duel, one of the last gods, defeated Badu and sealed him within an icy mountain.

In the present day, teenage Latok Kart of Fearless Village takes care of his blind mother after the disappearance of his father, the unfortunately named Dork Kart. He meets Pixie, an emissary of the Wavis Kingdom with a letter addressed to Dork. Latok reads the letter in his father's absence, learning that an unknown force has broken the seal and revived Badu, and that the Kart family are direct descendents of Duel, making them the best hope to stop the coming catastrophe.

Each *Xak* title picks up immediately after the last, following Latok on his journey to fulfil his destiny, from unassuming teen to Duel's successor. Latok's kind of a dope, and tends to find himself bewildered when facing a cast of beautiful women all vying for his affection. The stakes are raised with each successive entry, as bigger and bigger threats come spilling out of Xexis, culminating in *Xak III: The Eternal Recurrence*, where Latok and his longtime rival Rune, another descendent of Duel, are forced to put their differences aside and combine forces to vanquish the dark god Zomu Dizae.

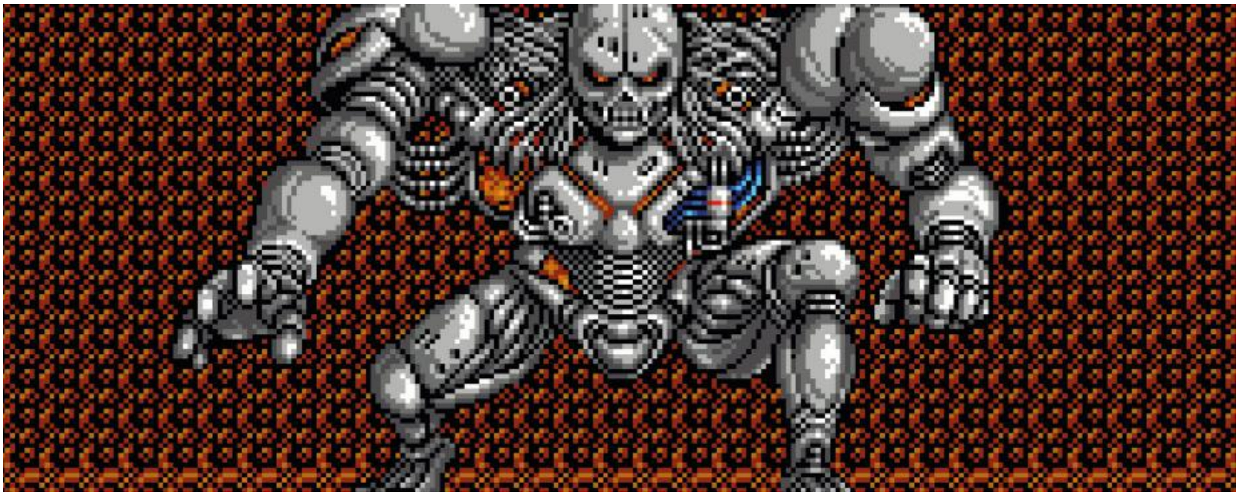




***Xak* may be one of the many rip-offs of Falcom's *Ys*, but it's also a well-executed one.**

Ultimately, *Xak* is a series of *Ys* clones – the first two entries were even bundled together on the PC Engine CD, à la *Ys I* & *II*, with assistance from longtime Falcom rival Nihon Telenet. They're very pretty, though; early entries feature art by Kia Asamiya (*Martian Successor Nadesico*), while *Xak III* is much darker in tone, with redesigned characters by Nobuteru Yuuki (*Escaflowne*) to reflect this. The shortest *Xak* title, computer exclusive *The Tower of Gazzel*, is arguably the series at its most adventurous: taking place after *Xak II*, a max-level Latok tackles the titular, trap-filled tower. With no more experience to gain, the player has to use their dexterity, wits, and Latok's companions to reach the top floor. It's not unlike a short tabletop campaign, and the focus allows it to shine brighter than the rest of the series.

Latok's main love interest, the mage Fray Jerbarn, received a spinoff called *Fray in: Magical Adventure*, a vertical shooter with RPG elements. Here, Fray wishes to become a great mage to impress Latok, so she sets off on her own journey to improve her magical abilities. It's a pretty sexist plot, but an undeniably adorable game, featuring chibi art by Masato Kanamono (*Crime Crackers*).



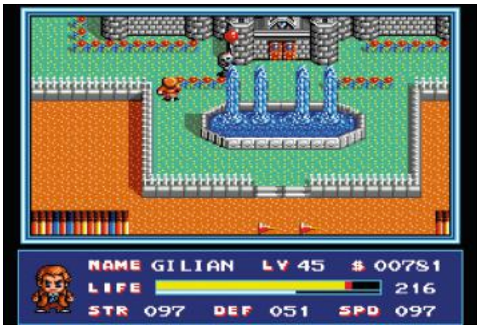
SD Snatcher

Developer: Konami | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): MSX2

While Hideo Kojima is known internationally as the creator of the *Metal Gear* series, one of his early titles was the adventure game *Snatcher*. Taking place in the future in Neo Kobe City, it stars a man named Gillian Seed, part of a task force called JUNKER that hunts down human-snatching robots; Gillian hopes that he can uncover his mysterious, forgotten past. While the story is a pastiche of various Hollywood sci-fi movies, *Blade Runner* and *The Terminator* in particular, its strong world design rendered it a classic.

In its original computer incarnation, released in 1988, the story also ended on a cliffhanger. Rather than creating a sequel, the team at Konami instead made a rather strange remake called *SD Snatcher* (the SD standing for "super-deformed"). Not only does this shift genres from adventure game to RPG, but it also changes the art style so all of the characters have a diminutive, chibi look. One of the most famous images of *Snatcher* shows one of the characters with his head twisted off; that same image, rendered in this cutesy art style, is both horrifying and hilarious. Your robo-buddy partner, Metal Gear Mk. II, even makes an appearance at handheld scale, now called Metal Gear Petit.

The plot of *SD Snatcher* is based on the original, though areas where you just clicked through commands and dialogue have been replaced with either maze-like dungeons, or locations you can explore to talk to people. The battle system is displayed from a first-person perspective, with nearly all of the enemies being some kind of robot. Rather than selecting foes directly, the entire screen is divided into a grid, allowing you to target individual body parts. There are several types of guns, with different effects, though it is possible to run out of ammunition. This is the main tactical difference from other RPGs, as you can disable enemies piece by piece, plus the pixel artwork mechanical designs are absolutely top-tier. There are no random encounters, as enemies appear on the screen, though they're tough to avoid. Indeed, the constant dungeon crawling and fighting means there's not as much exposition as in the original game. The music is entirely new, and as with many Konami MSX games, takes advantage of the SCC sound chip for bolstered sound.

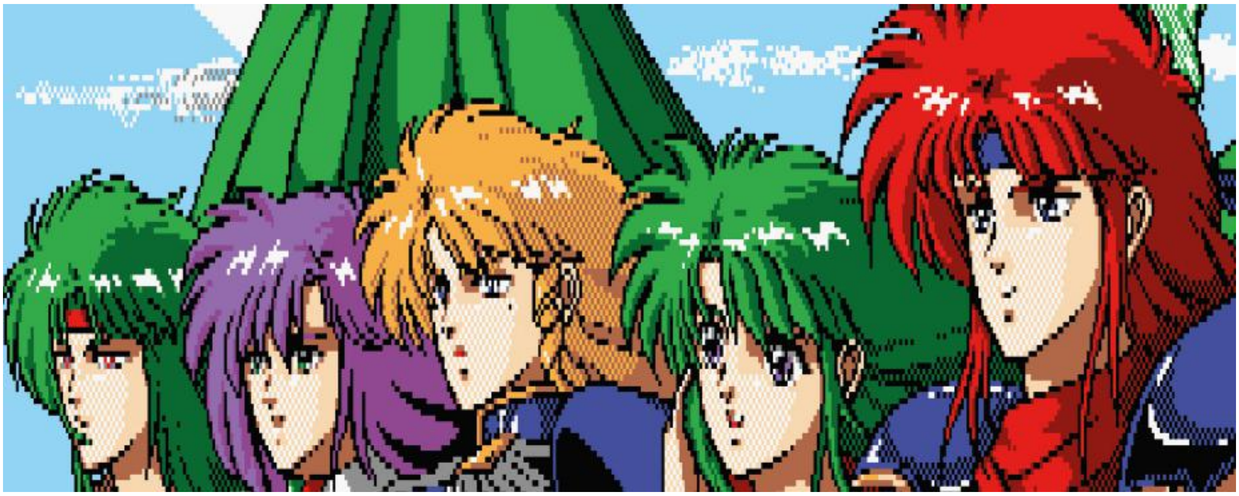


NAME GILIAN LV 45 $ 00781
LIFE 216
STR 097 DEF 051 SPD 097

SD
SNATCHER

One of the most famous scenes of *Snatcher* is when fellow JUNKER Jean-Jack Gibson is found with his head twisted off. Recreating this scene but with cutesy super-deformed characters leads to some dark comedy.

The story isn't a direct retelling of the original, as it features a few new scenarios, including one regarding a cult that worships Snatchers, and another one that takes place in an amusement park, which is a front for an underground Snatcher-producing lab. It also properly finishes off the storyline. When the original *Snatcher* was eventually ported to consoles (first in 1992 for the PC Engine CD, then in English in 1994 for the SEGA CD), it included an epilogue similar to this game. While this saw a few other ports down the line, *SD Snatcher* has largely been ignored, and never re-released outside of its MSX2 confines.

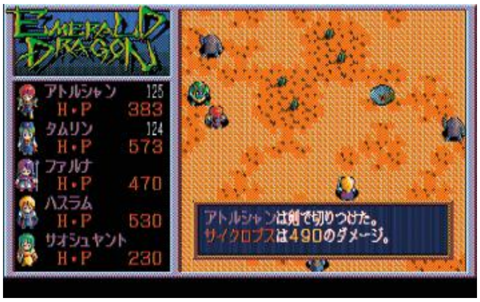


Emerald Dragon

Developer: Glodia | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, FMT, MSX2, X68, PCECD, SFC

Long ago, in the country of Ishuban, humans and dragons lived together in relative harmony. But racial tensions eventually arose, causing a curse to be placed on the dragons. Forced to flee through a dimensional rift, they made their home in another world, called Draguria. Centuries pass with no contact between the two, until a ship washes up on the shores of Draguria containing a human child. She's discovered by a dragon named Atrushan, who adopts the girl and names her Tamryn. He raises her as his own, but 12 years later, she yearns to return home to Ishuban. Atrushan gives her one of his horns and instructs her to blow it if she ever finds herself in danger. Sure enough, just a few years later, he hears the call across dimensions. Using a spell that lets him take human form, Atrushan crosses back into the human world, where he finds that the evil lord Tiridates is attempting to conquer the whole of Ishuban. Not only must he save his surrogate daughter, but also remove the curse that exiled his clan in the first place.

That's a pretty elaborate setup, particularly in an RPG from 1989, and it's where *Emerald Dragon*'s strength lies. The late '80s were a time when RPGs were getting away from hack-and-slashers and dungeon crawlers, and implementing stronger stories. There are over a dozen party members, each with their own personality, with plenty of lively dialogue, and the ability to regularly chat with each other. This is all fairly common in JRPGs nowadays, but compared to contemporary games like *Final Fantasy II* and *Dragon Quest IV* for the Famicom, it was definitely ahead of its time. It's rounded out with fantastic opening cinematics, attractive character designs by Akihiro Kimura. and a catchy soundtrack by Tenpei Sato, later known for his work on Nippon Ichi games.



アトルシャン 125
H・P 383
タムリン 124
H・P 573
ファルナ
H・P 470
ハスラム
H・P 530
サオシュヤント
H・P 230

アトルシャンは剣で切りつけた。
サイクロプスは490のダメージ。

As initially released on PC platforms, *Emerald Dragon* gameplay is pretty rough. The battle system is based on an earlier game by the same team, called *Zavas*, which is presented from an overhead perspective and is roughly similar to *Ultima III*. You only control the main character (Atrushan in this case), and you can only move a limited number of spaces on the field before moving to the next party member. However, every one else is loosely commanded and mostly governed by AI ... and it's pretty bad. If any one of them dies, you lose. There are other issues, like maps that are far too large and aimless, and an assortment of bugs, depending on the platform.

However, it was given a second chance with a PC Engine CD release in 1994. Developed by Alfa Systems (who worked on the TG-16 CD ports of *Ys*) and overseen by Shoji Masuda (*Tengai Makyou*), who fixed up a lot of its issues, added in fresh voice acting and cutscenes, and turned it into one of the best RPGs on the platform. A Super Famicom conversion was released in 1995, and like a lot of CD-ROM-to-cartridge conversions, it scales back quite a lot of things, removing areas and most of the cutscenes. While it's not as complete, it still maintains the excellent story, and it's decent enough on its own terms.

NEC
Emerald Dragon

The computer releases of *Emerald Dragon* have some issues, but the polish given to the PC Engine CD port turns it into one of the best RPGs on the platform.

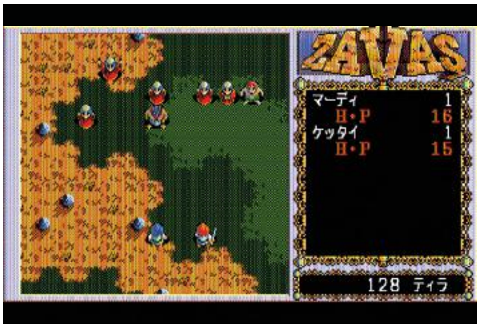
Zavas

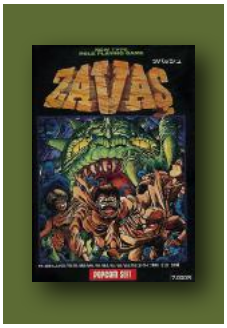
Developer: Glodia | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, X68

The devil king Darg has been reborn and is causing massive destruction across the land. The hero is a young man named Marty, whose family has been destroyed by Darg's rampaging. He swears to God that he will have his vengeance ... only to have his prayers answered: he is granted an immortal body to help him fight back.

Zavas was novel for a few reasons, primarily its size, boasting over 15,000 screens. There are tons of characters who can join Marty's quest, though they need to be paid daily for their services. You also need to keep yourself and your teammates fed, or your health won't be replenished when you camp at the end of each day. In addition to chatting with characters, you can also offer them food or booze, or challenge them to fights. Battles take place from an overhead perspective, but you only directly control the hero; your compatriots are controlled by AI.

The game was designed by Enjou Sanyuutei, a rakugo comedian who was also a huge game fan, and had his own column in the magazine *Popcom*. (It's actually his face on the god that grants the hero immortality, which kind of breaks the immersion.) However, he wasn't actually credited on the package, due to some development disputes. Given the massive size of the game world, it takes forever to do things, and parts of it feel unfinished. Still, it was popular enough to receive a sequel, where you can play as three different characters (a prince, a fisherman, and a merchant), and it established some systems used in Glodia's later games, including *Emerald Dragon* and *Alshark*. Unlike these games, neither *Zavas* title received any console ports.





The world of *Zavas* is absolutely massive, plus it lays down the tracks for later games by its developer.

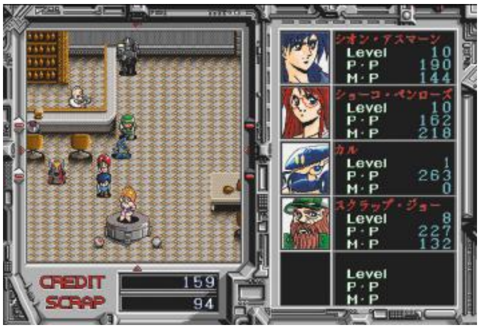
Alshark

Developer: Right Stuff | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): PC98, FMT, X68, MCD, PCECD

Alshark takes place in the universe of Wispread, consisting of three kingdoms with varying spheres of influence. The hero is a boy named Sion, whose life is shaken up when a meteorite hits his planet. He goes to investigate, only for his girlfriend's father to become possessed, and kill his own dad. Shaken by this disaster, he sets off on an intergalactic adventure to discover the root of the problem, requiring him to navigate the political tensions of the galaxy.

The game is the inaugural title from Right Stuff, a company formed by staff from Glodia. Most of the staff had previously worked on *Emerald Dragon*, including supervisor/writer Atsushi Ii, character artist Akihiro Kimura, and musician Tenpei Sato. As such, for the most part, it looks and plays like a science fiction version of that game, right down to the battle system, in which the player commands Sion and the computer controls everyone else. The art is pretty good, and the characters include robots and cyborgs. During space exploration, you can directly control your ship, presented from an overhead perspective, and guide it from planet to planet. You'll also run into enemies out in space, with combat here presented as a shoot-'em-up similar to Konami's *Time Pilot*.

The concept is cool, but the original PC game is still a bit rough around the edges, particularly since the space exploration is a little too open-ended. And while the console ports of *Emerald Dragon* got some polish, the Mega CD and PC Engine CD versions of *Alshark* really didn't, making it feel kinda crusty. Still, space opera RPGs are uncommon enough that it's interesting for that alone.



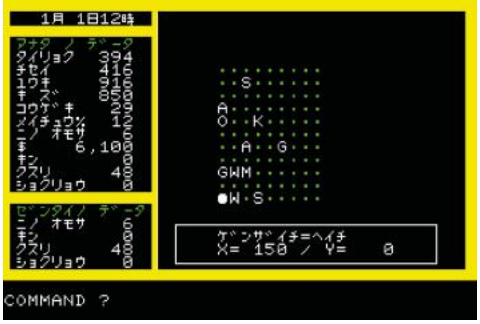
Sci-fi RPGs are artefacts to be treasured, though *Alshark* is no *Phantasy Star*.

Chitei Tanken

Developer: Koei | Released: 1982 | Platform(s): PC80

Chitei Tanken ("Underground Exploration", also the Japanese title for the Jules Verne book *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*) is believed to be the first original RPG to be developed in Japan. At the outset, you choose to take five explorers for an expedition (their stats are randomly generated each time), then spend some money to purchase (or sell) gold, medicine, and food. Then you enter the cave to hunt for treasure and fight monsters, which include Japanese movie favourites like Godzilla, Rodan, and Mothra. Unusually, you're not given an actual view of the exploration, but rather just coordinates and other statistics, which are pretty confusing to parse without a manual. Combat is shown in tiny visuals at the bottom of the screen, if you have a gun, otherwise it's just an image of a fist.

The game was part of Koei's Simulation Series, which included *Kawanakajima no Kassen* ("The Battles of Kawanakajima"), the first game by Kou Shibusawa and a strategy game that was a predecessor to the similar, though sci-fi-themed, *Nobunaga's Ambition: Ginga Senryaku* ("Galactic Strategy"); and *Toushi Game* ("Investment Game"), another Shibusawa game, this time focused on the stock market. Indeed, at this point Koei wasn't using the term "role-playing game" (though they would later), instead advertising *Chitei Tanken* as a "simulation game". So much of it is dependent on random chance that it is more of a simulation in that respect … but the major aspects of early RPGs – party creation, exploration, balancing of resource consumption, turn-based combat – are all found here, even though there's no experience or level gaining.



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COMMAND ?
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Japan's first role-playing game? It depends on how you define the word …

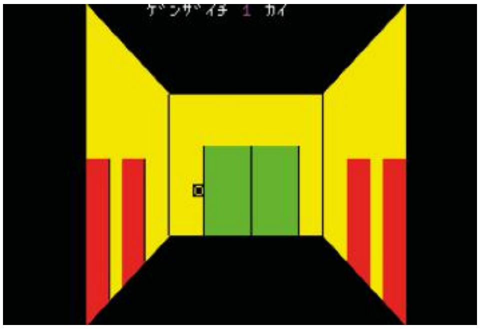
Spy Daisakusen

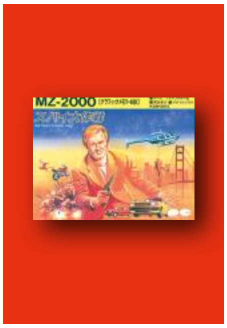
Developer: Pony Canyon | Released: 1982 | Platform(s): PC80, MZ

Spy Daisakusen literally translates as "Spy Operation", but it's also the Japanese name for the famous '60s television show *Mission: Impossible*. The premise here is borrowed wholesale, complete with a tape reel that addresses the player as "Mr. Phelps" before giving them a mission to infiltrate an enemy building and steal documents from its library. There are six floors and ten rooms on each floor, making for a total of 60 areas (plus the hallways) to explore.

Much of the game is randomly generated, including your spy's starting statistics. Then you're given access to an equipment bunker, allowing you bring in fun weapons like flame throwers, assault rifles, and submachine guns, and other things like explosive briefcases and gas grenades. You are, however, limited by your character's strength; if you overequip you'll end up collapsing in front of the building's front door.

The building consists of six floors, each with a single hallway containing many doors. This section is explored from a first-person perspective. The goal is to hunt for objects around the different rooms, though you may also encounter enemies. If you do, you're presented with an overhead view of the room, with bad guys represented by dots, and you can choose how to attack (aiming directly or firing wildly) and which weapon to use. Since the locations change every game, it's a new challenge every time, and the elevators have a nasty habit of randomly shocking (and killing) you, so it doesn't exactly play fair. Like many of these early games, this is arguably more of an adventure game than a role-playing game, though the packaging calls itself the latter.





This is another "simulation" title, though the first-person perspective and emphasis on both equipment and combat make it feel a little closer to an "RPG".

The Dragon & Princess

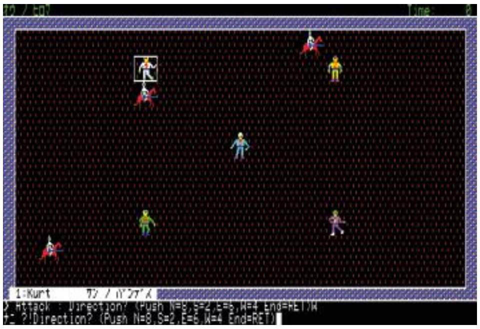
Developer: Koei | Released: 1982 | Platform(s): PC80, PC88

The Dragon & Princess, the next game from Koei, more closely resembles what would now be considered a "role-playing game", though it defines itself as a "fantasy adventure" game. Developer credit is given to "Y. Hayase" and "Locke", but it's not clear what their real identities are.

The initial goal is to take down some bandits at the orders of the king, but then you're tasked with rescuing a princess from a dragon. When the game starts, you pick names for your five heroes, each of whom has predetermined stats. Much of the game is actually played out like a text adventure, as you move from area to area, between the main town and the expansive wilderness. Movement is handled via the numpad and single letter commands, so you don't need to type full words each and every time.

When you're out and about, you're randomly drawn into combat, which is the only part of the game that has any non-text visuals. These episodes play out similarly to those in later strategy games; the field is divided into a square grid, and you move your five heroes towards the enemies to do battle. Your characters gain experience through fighting, but can also equip weapons to increase their power. Sometimes, visiting buildings will also grant riches, though enemy bandits can also sack them, an element later seen in games like *Fire Emblem.*

The maps are confusing, plus it is wildly unbalanced in the same way that most early RPGs are, but it's still an interesting game. An English fan translation exists for those who want to experience this essential part of Japanese RPG history.



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1:Kurt
> Attack : Direction? (Push N=8,S=2,E=6,W=4 End=RET)W
?!Direction? (Push N=8,S=2,E=6,W=4 End=RET)
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A blend of text and graphical elements, this is probably the first of what would nowadays be considered an "RPG".

Khufu-Ou no Himitsu

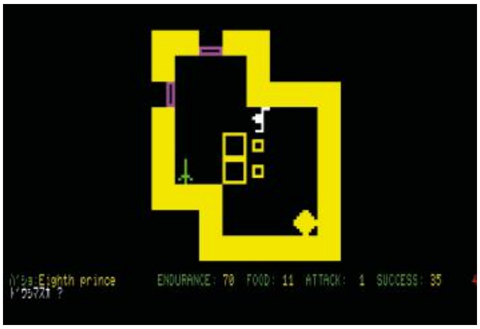
Developer: Koei | Released: 1983 | Platform(s): PC80, PC88, FM7

Advertisements for *Khufu-Ou no Himitsu* ("The Secret of King Khufu") bragged that it was the first RPG developed in Japan, though that has already been disputed. You control an explorer making their way through a pyramid, looking for the treasures of the titular Egyptian pharaoh.

While other early Japanese RPGs take after the likes of *Ultima* or *Wizardry,* this one is a little different, since it plays a lot like one of the entries in Epyx's *Dunjonquest* series, which began in 1979 and includes games like *Temple of Apshai, Hellfire Warrior,* and *The Datestones of Ryn.* This game opens up, as with many Koei games, with your stats randomly generated, including your endurance, food stash, and Attack Success Points. The game is a simple dungeon crawler, in which you move from room to room, find items, and attack enemies. The rooms are fairly small (though each is given a name), and while you can move to new rooms, you can't backtrack to old ones. There are branching rooms, however, and the map seems consistent each time.

Combat is as simple as walking up to an enemy (those include bugs like scorpions and spiders) and hacking at them until one of you dies; weapons you can find will greatly help. Your endurance and food drop constantly, but the various items you find can replenish them.

It calls itself a "Roll Playing Game" on the title screen, though except for some simple statistics, it's a pretty straightforward game, even compared to the *Dunjonquest* titles. Item types are limited and due to the linearity there's not even much to map. Still, it's an interesting piece of history, especially considering that none of the *Dunjonquest* games were released in Japan.



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ﾊﾞｼｮ:Eighth prince      ENDURANCE: 70  FOOD: 11  ATTACK:  1  SUCCESS: 35
ﾄﾞｳｼﾏｽｶ ?
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This pyramid exploration game is probably a little too simple to be considered an RPG, but it's not the only one to bear a resemblance to a Western series.

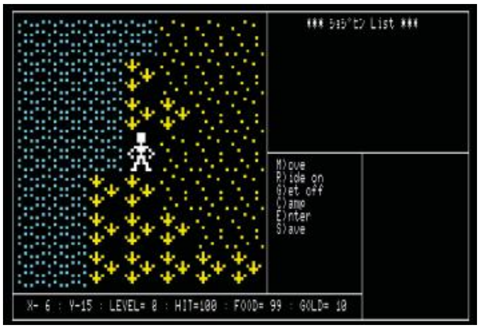
Seiken Densetsu

Developer: Compaq | Released: 1983 | Platform(s): PC80, PC88

Seiken Densetsu translates as "Legend of the Holy Sword", though it's completely unrelated to Square's later series of the same name, also known as the *Mana* series. It came out courtesy of Compaq and is a fairly standard *Ultima* clone. The game begins with character creation and allocation of numbers to five different stats, at which point you enter the world map. Moving is frustrating since you need to select the "Move" command with the "M" key every time you walk a square. When you encounter an enemy army, you can choose how many rounds you want to fight, which are illustrated by tiny stick figures pummelling each other until the prescribed number of rounds is completed. The goals are to find the four sacred swords and rescue a sleeping princess.

There are towns you can enter, which look almost identical to those in *Ultima* games, with each room and location described with English letters. In addition to weapons and armour, you can also purchase various methods of transportation, including a bicycle, a horse, a boat, and a magic carpet. You can also buy camping gear, as well as fishing equipment. As with most RPGs of the era, you need food to survive, which you can also purchase. Defeated enemies yield experience points, plus you need to hunt for gold to purchase more items. There are also characters on the overworld map that give obtuse hints.

Compared to some of the other *Ultima*-type games released around the time, like *Poibos* and *Dungeon*, *Seiken Densetsu* is a little simple, as you only play as one character, and there aren't any dungeons to explore.



This game is unrelated to Square's later series of the same name. "Holy Sword Legend" is a pretty generic title for an RPG.

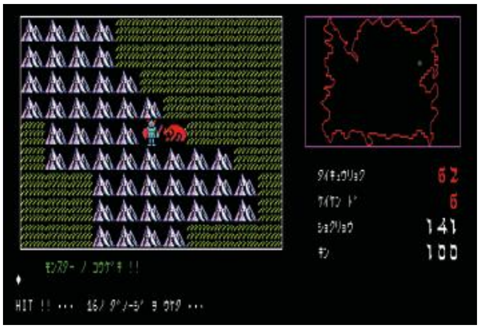
Dungeon

Developer: Koei | Released: 1983 | Platform(s): PC80, PC88, FM7

Released in late 1983, Koei's *Dungeon* is often cited as the first Japanese RPG. We've seen many examples already that disputes this, not only with borderline games like *Spy Daisakusen,* but also earlier titles like *The Dragon & Princess,* as well as Falcom's *Panorama Tou,* released around the same time. At its core, the game is very similar to the early *Ultima* titles. New for *Dungeon* is that you can pick from five character classes – Warrior, Wizard, Monk, Bandit, and Ninja – then roll for starting stats. You're then plopped down on a random part of the island of Zargos, with the ultimate goal of finding the lost city of El Dorado. In addition to monsters roaming the land, there are several towns, as well as numerous entrances to the titular dungeon. Every move saps your endurance, plus you need to be mindful of your food, which also depletes constantly.

Towns are handled entirely via text interface, through which you can purchase food and other items, while dungeon exploration is handled from the first-person perspective. Encounters are one-on-one, as enemies move in semi-real time around the dungeon. There are four types of physical attack (plus magic spells), as well as four defensive moves. The enemy designs, though static, are nicely drawn for the PC88 version – the PC80 version is much lower res, with foes being rendered in single colours pixels. Though there are only five floors, the base level is absolutely huge – it seems to extend below the entire area of the island.

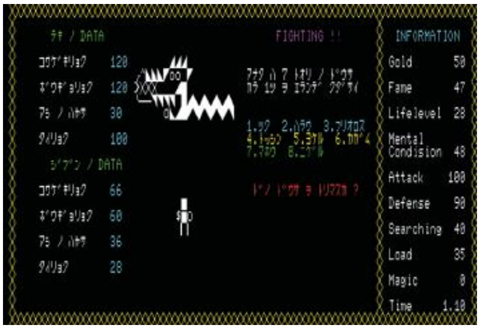
Dungeon is more interesting from a historical perspective than anything else – it is a competent *Ultima* clone, and while it is unwieldy, the same can be said for most titles of the era.



***Dungeon* may be a pretty generic title, but its massive labyrinth seems to be the size of the entire overworld island.**

Ken to Mahou

Developer: Koei | Released: 1983 | Platform(s): PC80, PC88, FM7



The “text characters as graphical tiles” aesthetic is severely underrated, and can also be found in a few interesting Japanese PC titles, like the MZ-700 port of *Mappy*.

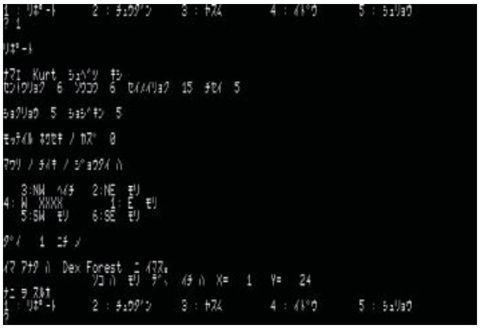
Another RPG from Koei, released in August 1983, this game is known by both its Japanese title, *Ken to Mahou*, and its translated English name, *Sword and Sorcery*. It’s a pretty standard fantasy setup, as the princess of the kingdom has been kidnapped by an evil wizard, and you must venture across the kingdom to rescue her. At the outset, you can choose from nine character classes – Fighter, White Knight, Black Knight, Human, Pilgrim, Druid, Wizard, Dwarf, and Elf (mis-spelled “Fairly” in some versions). Then you’re plopped down in the starting area, from where you can visit the town or the castle, before venturing out into the overworld.

Exploration is handled as in *Ultima*, though you’ll run into random encounters when out on the map. Battles are fought one-on-one in a turn-based fashion, though here there are several commands beyond just the straightforward Fight, including three types of physical attacks, three types of defensive moves, and magic spells. Given this, there’s a sort of rock-paper-scissors mechanic that helps decide how the battle will play out, as opposed to direct comparison of stats. Nonetheless, it is an exceedingly difficult game, as it will regularly put you up against powerful dragons right at the start, in which case your fledging hero will likely be doomed.

While released for several platforms, the PC80 version is the most visually interesting, since it displays everything via the computer’s text character set rather than as sprite-based visuals. Heads and shields are rendered as zeroes, arms are shown as slashes, and bodies rendered as either white squares or triangles, which is extremely creative.

Arfgaldt

Developer: ASCII | Released: 1983 | Platform(s): PC80, PC88, FM7



The game is nothing fancy, but its title alone justifies its importance in the pantheon of Japanese RPGs, having very probably inspired *Dragon Quest.*

When discussing lots of these early Japanese PC releases, the question is often asked, “Is this an RPG?”; the answer often boils down to, “Not really, but it depends how you define RPG”. In the case of *Arfgaldt*, the answer is definitively “yes”, as it contains pretty much all of the hallmarks. It was originally published as a type-in in *ASCII* magazine before receiving a retail release on tape a little way down the road.

The game is entirely text driven, and gives you a predefined character, put out into the world to explore. You can get a report of all of your stats, which include your current location, as X/Y coordinates on the hexagonal world map (which was included with the magazine or in the package), and all possible exits. You can also hunt for monsters, and if you find one, you’ll enter a turn-based battle, though the only selections you can make are to attack or to run away. If you step off the main paths, you also run into random encounters. You search for treasure, as well as food to keep yourself from starving. You’ll also level up the more you fight. You can find fellow warriors to join your journey too, with no limit as to how many can join you, though they need to be fed as well. Imagining dozens of fellow warriors, a literal small army, traipsing around the countryside and beating up stuff, is a pretty amusing pastime.

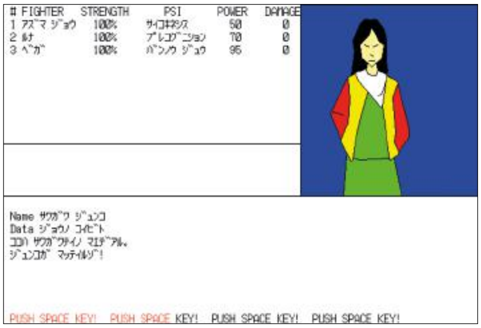
The title of the game is also historically important. While various sources render the English title as *Arfgaldt*, in Japanese, the spelling is extremely close to Alefgard, the name of the kingdom in the first *Dragon Quest*. It’s almost certainly the case that Yuji Horii played this game and named that setting as a tribute.

Genma Taisen

Developer: Pony Canyon | Released: 1983 | Platform(s): PC60, PC88, FM7

Genma Taisen, literally translated as “Great War of the Phantom Demons” but also known as *Harmagedon*, is a sci-fi manga by Kazumasa Hirai and Shotaro Ishinomori that began in 1967. It focuses on the heroic trio of high school student Jo Azuma, alien cyborg Vega, and Translvanian Princess Luna, who gather together to use their psychic powers to defeat the demon Genma Daioh. An anime film was released in 1983, including distribution in the United States, which was also used as the basis for a full-motion video (FMV) game from Data East called *Bega’s Battle*.

Another computer game tie-in was released in 1983, published by Pony Canyon. As with many early RPGs, the term can be applied only very loosely. There is no exploration or movement of any kind; the game is divided up into several battle scenes, which pits the heroes against various enemies. The stats for Jo, Vega, and Luna are listed at the top of the screen, along with their PSI (psychic) abilities, and then the game asks you to select a character to make the attack, and poses some questions, typically yes-or-no. Based on your choices you’ll either inflict or take damage, or possibly even be wiped out immediately. It doesn’t appear to use any mathematical computations to resolve conflicts, so all outcomes are predetermined based on your choices. Given this, it’s probably more accurate to say that this is more of a choose-your-own-adventure, which uses the trappings of a role-playing game as window dressing. Some versions are text-only, while others show simple renditions of characters in the corner of the screen; many of these look a little on the goofy side.



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# FIGHTER   STRENGTH   PSI          POWER  DAMAGE
1 ｱｽﾞﾏ ｼﾞｮｳ   100%     ｻｲｺｷﾈｼｽ        50      0
2 ﾙﾅ          100%     ﾌﾟﾚｺｸﾞﾆｼｮﾝ     70      0
3 ﾍﾞｶﾞ        100%     ﾊﾞﾝﾉｳ ｼﾞｭｳ     95      0

Name ｻﾜｶﾞﾜ ｼﾞｭﾝｺ
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ｼﾞｭﾝｺｶﾞ ﾏｯﾃｲﾙｿﾞ!

PUSH SPACE KEY!  PUSH SPACE KEY!  PUSH SPACE KEY!  PUSH SPACE KEY!
```

PC-6001
幻魔大戦

***Harmagedon* was one of the first official tie-ins with an anime and/or manga, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last.**

Poibos

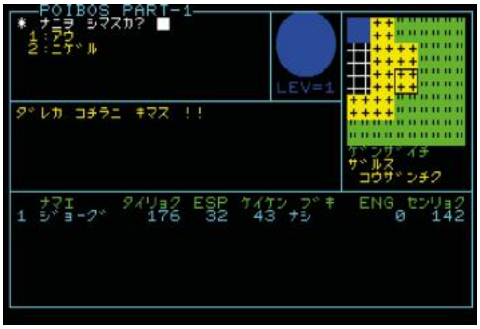
Developer: Zatsoft | Released: 1983 | Platform(s): PC60, PC80, PC88, PC98, FM7, MZ, X1

Poibos was published by Daimyou Microcomputer Academy, and was released on nearly every computer platform of the time. While some other contemporaneous RPGs, like *Seiken Densetsu* and *Dungeon,* used typical fantasy themes, *Poibos* was one of the first to use a sci-fi setting, inspired by *Star Wars.* The title is a misspelling of Phoebus, the Greek/Roman god also known as Apollo.

It actually has a pretty cool backstory, too. The tyrannical Dark Emperor of the nation of Krane has destroyed the planet of Poibos, and has captured its few remaining citizens, including the hero, Jorg. Jorg is tasked with breaking out of prison, finding the few remaining citizens of Poibos, and escape off-planet. In addition to a few key characters needed to complete the game, there are nearly 20 potential party members, though only six can join at once.

Exploration is handled in a small window, with a highlighted square that indicates your position. When in combat, you can choose both attack and defence values for all party members, from 0-100. By choosing how aggressively to attack, you can build more elaborate strategies than in other RPGs of the time. Since all of the player characters are escapees, the only way to find weapons is by claiming them from defeated enemies, though they’ll run out of energy after a number of uses.

The title indicates that this is *Part 1,* subtitled *Dasshutsu* (“The Escape”). Unfortunately the developer went out of business after this game, so there was never a Part 2. Nonetheless, it’s one of the more interesting and innovative early Japanese PC RPGs.



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POIBOS PART-1
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  2:ﾆｹﾞﾙ
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ポイボス
ZAT SOFT

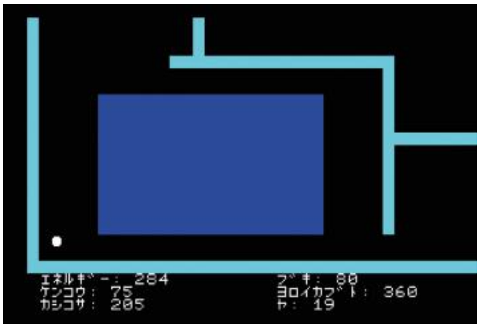
***Poibos Part 2* joins *The Moonstone*, the would-be sequel to *The Black Onyx*, as one of the early Japanese RPGs that was planned but never saw release.**

Dragon Lair

Developer: Fugen Electronics | Released: 1983 | Platform(s): PC80, PC88, FM7

Dragon Lair is a simple action RPG, roughly similar to Automated Simulation/Epyx's *Dunjonquest* games. The game starts in a shop, where you can use your limited amount of gold to purchase equipment. You then set off to explore a fairly large maze. Everything is rendered as coloured dots – your hero is white, equipment is yellow, while treasure and curatives (and also traps) are green. Enemies are red, and the text that pops up at the top of the screen helps identify exactly what they're supposed to be (vampires, werewolves, etc.) Sometimes the screens are filled with tiny red dots that are supposed to be things like spiders, which don't move but need to be avoided. In addition to collecting treasure, you have to find the Golden Dragon within the depths of the maze, while both dealing with enemies and keeping an eye on your stamina. The maze layout is the same in every game though the actual contents are randomised. You can also hunt for hidden passages to reveal more treasure, but that has the tendency to crash the game.

What is curious is the game's background. Though published by Fugen Electronics, the FM-7 version credits two American developers, John and Patty Bell. These were the owners of Crystalware, a company that developed and published numerous games in the United States, primarily for the Apple II and Atari 8-bit computers. Their titles *House of Usher* and *Beneath the Pyramids* are a whole lot like *Dragon Lair*. So it's not clear whether they developed *Dragon Lair* specifically for Japanese computers, or they licenced the idea to Fugen and let them develop it, or Fugen just ripped off their design but decided to at least credit them.



DRAGON LAIR

Dragon Lair (no relation to the laserdisc arcade game) is like _The Black Onyx_, in that an early Japanese RPG is linked to a non-Japanese developer.

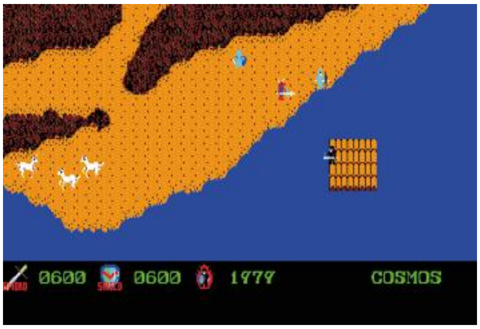
Courageous Perseus

Developer: Cosmos | Released: 1984 | Platform(s): PC88, FM7, X1, MSX

Courageous Perseus was one of the first action RPGs to be released in Japan, coming out the same month as *Dragon Slayer* and beating *Hydlide* to the market by a few months. However, it tends to be forgotten, since both of those went on to produce many sequels and console ports, whereas this one didn't. It stars the Grecian hero Perseus, who explores an island ruled by the Gorgon, with the goal being to collect either the three goddess statues, or the 12 Zodiac symbols.

The map is fairly open, though the many impassable forests and mountains make it hard to manoeuvre. Combat is simple, as you just hold down a button and bump into enemies to attack. At the beginning, Perseus is too frail to kill most enemies, so you need to find and prey on the weaker foes, killing them to slowly increase your offence and defence, which will eventually allow you to take on stronger enemies. Defeated enemies don't respawn either, so the island will slowly become more and more deserted. However, there's no indication of which enemies you should be taking on, so it's all trial and error. (Make sure to watch for the crabs when you're on the raft, because they can kill you instantly.) You also have to deal with your energy meter, which drops regardless of whether you're fighting, and is replenished by finding bells left throughout the land.

Courageous Perseus is basically all about the grind, but it's actually far less difficult than most of the other action RPGs that followed in its immediate footsteps – once you understand the chain of enemies to attack, it's not that hard to beat, compared to the dark magic you need to summon to get anywhere in *Xanadu*.



MSX
Perseus

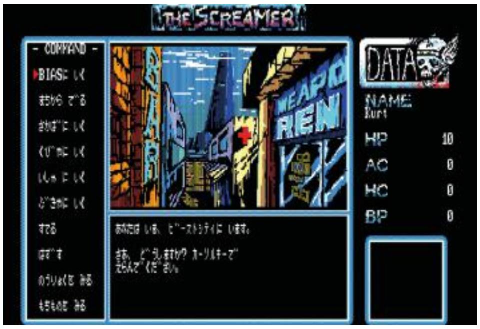
One of Japan's earliest action RPGs, _Courageous Perseus_ received no console ports or sequels, so it ended up being mostly forgotten.

The Screamer

Developer: Magical Zoo | Released: 1985 | Platform(s): PC88

The year is 199X. Due to a food crisis, Japan establishes a genetic laboratory called BIAS (Biological Intelligence in Artificial System) to find a solution. However, World War III happens anyway, and much of the world populace is wiped out. Humanity survives, but due to lack of resources, the halls of BIAS have been neglected, along with the strange and mysterious creatures that dwell within. Unable to do much themselves, the government offers rewards to mercenaries who will clean it up, known as Screamers.

This first-person dungeon crawler has an impeccably drawn scenario with some incredible art, as a post-apocalyptic bio-horror cyberpunk tale. For 1985, the atmosphere is incredible, in spite of its simplicity, with its grimy halls and dimly-lit corridors, as well as the terrifying mutants that lie within. The townspeople in Beast City, the settlement that has grown up around BIAS, are an eclectic cast of characters, and fellow Screamers include a whip-brandishing Nazi woman and a mask-wearing claw wielder. The concept takes the *Wizardry* formula and really does something interesting with it.



THE SCREAMER

Too bad *The Screamer* is almost impossible to play. Rather than creating a party and engaging in turn-based combat, you control a single character and the action-based combat is viewed from a side-on perspective. However, these battles are incredibly clumsy, plus it has a permadeath mechanic, which will delete your saved game when you die (unless you write-protect your save disk). This game begs for a remake, and indeed one was in the works at one point, though it never came to fruition.

Magical Zoo was mostly known for educational and utility software, so *The Screamer* was a rare venture into gaming.

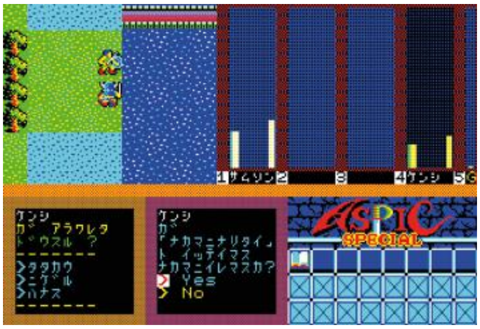
Lizard / Aspic

Developer: XtalSoft | Released: 1984 | Platform(s): PC60, PC88, FDS

Lizard and *Aspic* are two related RPGs developed by XtalSoft. In *Lizard*, initially released in 1984, your goal is to climb a tower and defeat monsters, thus obtaining the Book of Truth from the Great Lizard, in order to help rescue a princess. It's a standard first-person dungeon crawler, though when you enter combat, your hero and the enemy (which is always represented by a lizard sprite regardless of what it is) duke it out. You just mash the Fight command and whoever has the higher stats or more health wins. There's not much to it, though there are three character classes to pick from (Warrior, Thief, and Merchant).

Its sequel, *Aspic*, was released two years later, in 1986, and is much more elaborate. The same hero, now named Samson, is tasked by the king with defeating the evil serpent king of the game's title. There's an actual overworld now; its towns, caves and other structures are explored in a first-person view, as in its predecessor. There are characters in the battlefield that you can draft into combat, which is also displayed side-on, though it otherwise works similar. A Famicom Disk System port from Bothtec is uglier, due to the lower resolution, and makes the combat action-based, which ends up being pretty clumsy.

It does have a pretty cool plot twist, though. Once you defeat Aspic at the end of the game and return to the king's castle, he kicks you out, as he believes you've been cursed as well. So you storm the castle and murder him, revealing that the king was right – Aspic actually has an immortal soul and merely transfers himself into the body of anyone who kills him, which in this case, was you. How dark and tragic!

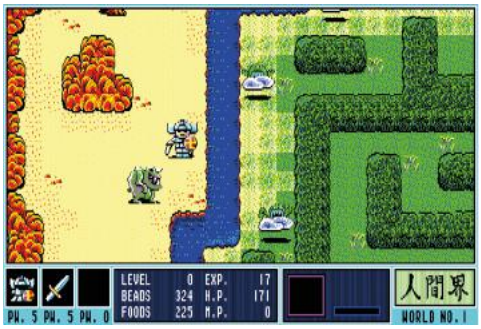


アスピック
PC-6001mkII/SR

The shocking ending of *Aspic*, the sequel to *Lizard*, remains one of the most tragic among early RPGs.

Gandhara: Buddha no Seisen

Developer: Enix | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, X1, MSX, FM7



***Gandhara* is one of the few RPGs to feature a Buddhist theme.**

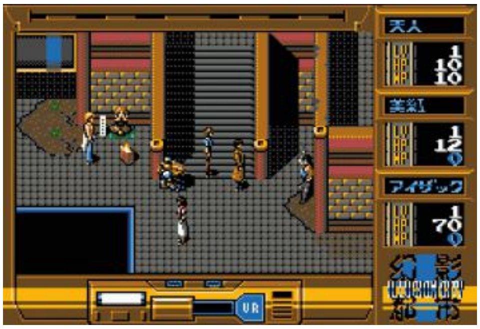
Gandhara: Buddha no Seisen ("The Crusade of Buddha") is an action RPG from Enix based on Buddhist mythology, in which your hero is commanded by the bodhisattva Akasagarbha to save the world from demons. Loosely based on the six planes of existence, there are six different worlds to fight though – human, hell, demon, beast, war, and finally heaven. There's little to the game beyond beating up enemies, visiting caves and purchasing equipment, but the worlds are fun to explore. Your hero attacks by stabbing or using magical rays, while he needs to manage his hunger by defeating certain kinds of enemies. He also restores health by praying at specific trees.

The visuals are excellent, blowing away what the Famicom was achieving at the time, with large sprites and comical designs, though the action is fairly slow. The game's sluggishness and simple story mean it doesn't quite hold up compared to *Ys*, which was released later in the year, but it's a big step up from *Hydlide*. There are so few games that focus on Buddhist mythology (Namco's *Youkai Douchuuki* and Taito's *Fudou Myououden*, drastically localised in the West as *Demon Sword*, and a few others) that the novelty alone makes it fairly interesting.

The game design and art are by Tadashi Makimura, a manga artist who worked with Go Nagai, and the programming is by Toru Hidaka, both of whom were involved with many of Enix's early works. The music is by Koichi Sugiyama, known for his world-famous *Dragon Quest* soundtracks. This game came out after *Dragon Quest*, but Enix mostly ditched the PC platform after this, except for a few games like *46 Okunen Monogatari*.

Illusion City

Developer: Micro Cabin | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): FMT, MSXR, PC98, MCD, X68



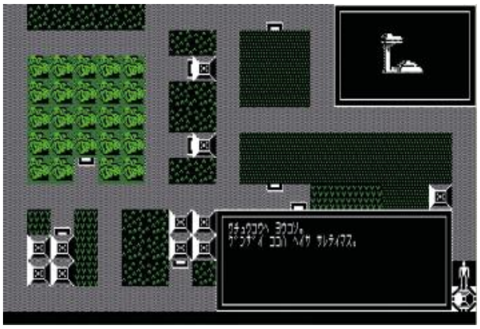
This cyberpunk RPG preceded similar games like *Megami Tensei II* and the Mega CD version of *Shadowrun.*

In *Illusion City*, after the return of Hong Kong to China, the city was affected by a mysterious earthquake that levelled almost the entire island. An international intelligence group named SIVA sent in investigators, and after a few months, declared it safe for habitation, though what they discovered was never made public. Fast-forward a couple of decades, and people have returned, though the city is now stratified into two layers: a new artificial crust on the top, and the remains of old Hong Kong below. The story begins when a detective named Tien Ren begins investigating the kidnapping of a young woman, leading him to uncover the role that SIVA still plays.

Illusion City has a distinctive cyberpunk aesthetic, mixed with a bit of Oriental mysticism. This blend of technology and magic is similar to that in *Shadowrun*, albeit with an Asian setting. Together with its themes of demons and eastern religion, this makes for an interesting game that has earned its reputation as a cult classic. The story is pretty cool, though it ends up being too elaborate and confusing. As one of the few games released for the MSXTurboR, it's technically advanced for that platform, but its deficiencies show in ports for more powerful platforms (PC88/98, X68000, FM Towns and Mega CD) – the sprites are tiny, the animation is choppy, and most landscapes are rather unimpressive. Mechanically, the battles, displayed from an over-the-shoulder perspective, are slow and difficult, though encounters are at least visible. The music, though, is pretty good. Overall, it's a decent, albeit rough-around-the-edges, title from Micro Cabin, who proved here that they could do more innovative RPGs than *Xak*.

Psychic City / Kaleidoscope

Developer: Hot-B | Released: 1984 | Platform(s): PC88, FM7



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Kaleidoscope
カレイドスコープ

Hot-B's RPGs had really cool concepts, but generally awful execution, even in their early days. Pictured here is *Kaleidoscope.*

Hot-B wasn't exactly a top-tier developer, being known mostly for its *Black Bass* fishing games and a few alright shoot-'em-ups like *Steel Empire*, but they were also early to the RPG game. Their first entry was *Psychic City*, released in late 1984. It takes place on an alternate Earth where a select group of humans called Rapps developed psychic powers. However, they are subject to routine prejudice, and were hunted down during World War III, forced to live in the ruins of New York City. As a fighter, initially hunting down Rapps, you end up changing sides and learning some psychic powers yourself, as you fight back to protect them.

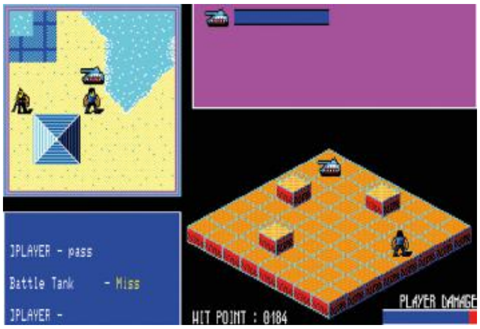
This is a great concept, and the intro cutscenes are stunning. However, the actual game is rather dull-looking. At the outset, you can allocate points to several types of psychic powers (telepathy, psychokinesis, etc.) but when you play the game, it's very basic, as your character is represented by a square, and turn-based battles occur against tiny sprites. In the end, it doesn't live up to its ambitions.

Hot-B tried again with *Kaleidoscope*, a sci-fi series. The character creation here is incredibly ambitious, as you can choose from eight different races, each with different skills and life spans, plus you can select their classes. However, the game itself is still fairly simple. The visuals have been upgraded to resemble those in the *Ultima* games, but navigation is a tremendous pain, since it's never clear what kind of terrain you can walk on. The game was initially intended to have multiple scenarios, but only two were ever produced.

Hot-B made their next RPG on the Famicom, the famously dreadful *Hoshi wo Miru Hito.*

Genesis: Beyond the Revelation

Developer: Square | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98



1PLAYER - pass
Battle Tank - Miss
1PLAYER -
HIT POINT : 0184

The battle system in *Genesis* is pretty interesting, but the difficulty is so out of balance that it makes it hard to appreciate.

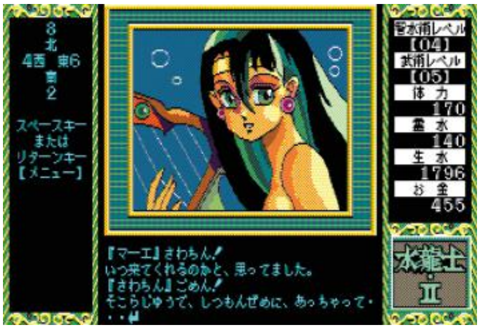
Genesis: Beyond the Revelation opens with an elaborate cutscene animation, showing the nuclear destruction of a city skyline. After creating your character, choosing from four classes – Soldier, Karateka, Esper, or Doctor – you explore the wasteland in this early RPG inspired by *Mad Max* and *Fist of the North Star*.

Beyond the post-apocalyptic setting, *Genesis* offers a novel battle system. When encountering an enemy, combatants enter an arena presented from an isometric perspective. Unlike the combat scenes in *Ultima III* and other similar games, these arenas take height into account, allowing you to hide behind parts of the scenery to avoid enemy attacks. It's novel, though the game is extraordinarily difficult, putting you up against hordes of thugs or tanks (or both) before you can even get your bearings. The Project EGG listing advises that you try to find the missile weapon as soon as possible and attack from high altitudes.

This game's release is poorly documented. *Cruise Chaser Blassty*, released in 1986, is believed to be Square's first RPG, though *Genesis* might actually predate it. The title screen lists both 1985 and 1987, but all sources point to 1987 being its true release date. The game was also distributed by Takeru vending machines, which created disks for customers on demand, then printed out an accompanying label and an instruction manual. The main menu also credits Hiromichi Tanaka, a game designer on *Final Fantasy III* and *Trials of Mana*, who was still with the company in a production role as of 2016, and Toshiaki Imai, a sound programmer for many of the early NES games.

Suiryuushi (series)

Developer: Shambalah | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, WIN



『マーエ』さわちん！
いつ来てくれるのかと、思ってました。
『さわちん』ごめん！
そこらじゅうで、しつもんぜめに、あっちゃって・・・↵

Suiryuushi ("Water Dragon Knight") takes place in Saltia, a land that has discovered the magic properties of water using a skill they call hydrology. The land was guided by the Great Water Dragon, until he was killed by dissidents, causing the civilisation to fall into disarray. A millennium later, a young orphaned boy sets off on a journey to resurrect the Great Water Dragon and save the land.

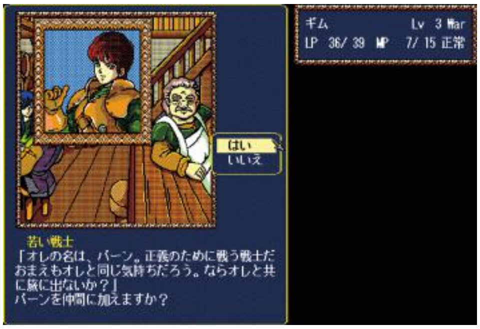
Released in 1989, *Suiryuushi* feels a little basic, with a simple interface and battle system that more closely resembles early titles like *Mugen no Shinzou*. While the hero can eventually meet up with a companion, a healer from his hometown, fights are one-on-one. However, the unique worldview, based on the power of water, as well as its fantastic illustrations, eventually earned it some recognition from the Japanese PC community.

The game was followed up by a sequel that takes place 18 years later, starring the son of the protagonists from the first game. He can't use hydrology, but does have special skills, and he is accompanied by a mermaid named Mahe. This was in turn followed up by a side story, *Mediflora no Izumi* ("Fountain of Mediflora"), starring a merman named Pantello, who casts spells using his musical skills. The last game in the series is *Suiryuushi Gaiden: Getsuryuu no Yama* ("Moon Dragon Mountain"), a first-person dungeon crawler starring the sister of the hero from the second game. The series was well-remembered enough for a "reprint edition" for modern PCs to be released in 2018, featuring updated art, but mostly playing the same. All of these games are classified as "adult" because they feature many topless women (both monsters and other girls), but they're quite tame.

While the game itself is a little simple for a 1989 release, these "spiritual water magic" RPGs have excellent stories, and a unique worldview, as well as decent art and music.

Record of Lodoss War (series)

Developer: HummingBirdSoft | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, X68, WIN, PCECD, SFC



若い戦士
「オレの名は、パーン。正義のために戦う戦士だ
おまえもオレと同じ気持ちだろう。ならオレと共
に旅に出ないか？」
パーンを仲間に加えますか？

Lodoss-tou Senki ("The Record of Lodoss War") was one of the most popular fantasy-themed pieces of Japanese fiction in the late '80s and early '90s. Written by Ryo Mizuno and based on a story that emerged from *Dungeons and Dragons* campaigns, it takes place on the titular cursed island, featuring the usual Western archetypes. The hero is ostensibly a man named Parn, though Deedlit the blond-haired elf-woman was by far the most popular character. Of course, it inspired a number of RPGs, the first series of which came from HummingBirdSoft and started on PC platforms. The first game, *Hairo no Majo* ("The Grey Witch") is loosely based on the novel of the same name, and you can create your own party members, or recruit various familiar characters. These games are pretty typical late '80s JRPGs, though the dungeons are first-person, while the battles within use a turn-based tactical perspective. The first sequel was *Goshiki no Maryuu* ("The Five-Coloured Magic Dragon"), also based on assorted novels. Also released were several "*Fukujinzuke*" fan disks, a reference to the pickled vegetables typically served with curry.

Both PC games were also ported to the PC Engine CD in the early '90s, with greatly improved visuals and the use of art and voice acting consistent with the contemporaneous anime adaptation. Following this, there was a third game for the Super Famicom, in which the battle segments used an isometric perspective. Later *Lodoss War* RPGs include a strategy RPG for the Mega CD, and a hack-and-slash dungeon crawler for the Dreamcast (see page 487), one of the few *Lodoss* games released internationally.

Record of Lodoss War **was one of the most popular fantasy-themed properties of the era, with numerous anime, video game, manga, and novel tie-ins.**

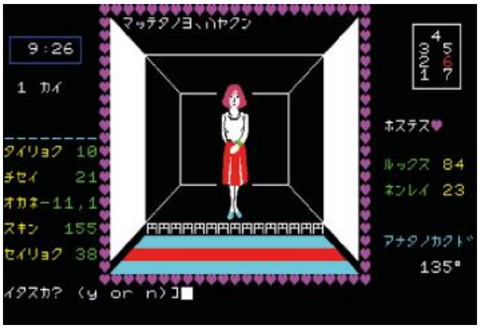
Danchizuma no Yuuwaku

Developer: Koei | Released: 1983 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, FM7

Danchizuma no Yuuwaku ("Housewife Seduction") is Koei's third RPG, and deviates wildly from anything they'd done before. Rather than an adventurer or an explorer, you control a condom salesman patrolling an apartment building. Technically you're there to sell prophylactics, but your secondary goal is to seduce any bored housewife. At the outset, you roll your character's stats, before being given free rein to roam the halls of the building, which is explored from a first-person perspective. In between knocking on doors, you may also be confronted by wandering spirits or dangerous yakuza, whom you can fight. When you meet a woman, you're shown her age and attractiveness rating. When you've convinced a woman to sleep with you, you hit the return key to thrust, while a graph indicates progress, though you can (and often will) get a negative performance review.

The entire game is just managing dwindling resources – your strength and intelligence go down with every action, and the curative items you find lying around don't restore you much. Ultimately, you only have so much virility before the game ends. For as saucy as the premise is, there's no actual nudity, as even the sex scenes are censored. In that way, it's far more like Sierra's *Leisure Suit Larry* than an actual porn game, since it's more about the humour than the sex.

The game was the first in Koei's *Strawberry Porno* series which includes *Oranda Tsuma wa Denki Unagi no Yume o Miru ka?* (see below). It was later bundled with *Night Life*, which isn't a game so much as a bedroom aid: it suggests sexual positions and helps estimate safe days to avoid impregnation.



団地妻の誘惑
KOEI

This offbeat Koei RPG is sort of the Eastern equivalent to Sierra's *Leisure Suit Larry*.

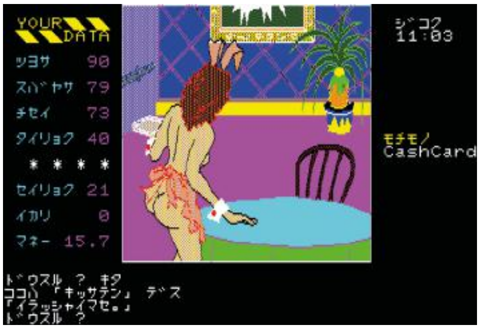
Oranda Tsuma wa Denki Unagi no Yume o Miru ka?

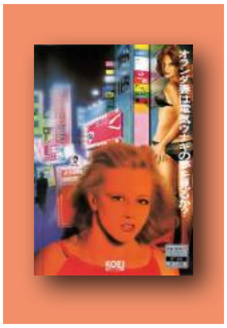
Developer: Koei | Released: 1984 | Platform(s): PC88, FM7

Oranda Tsuma wa Denki Unagi no Yume o Miru ka? ("Do Dutchwives Dream of Electric Eels?", where "dutchwives" is a Japanese term for sex dolls) is an obvious parody of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, otherwise known as the inspiration for the movie *Blade Runner*. Here, some robotic pleasure models have gone rogue in the Tokyo red light district Kabukicho, and as a private detective, it's your job to suss them out. After rolling for stats, you begin prowling the town, which is presented from an overhead perspective, à la *Ultima*. You can visit shops (many of which are love hotels and adult toy stores) and interrogate people for advice, ultimately leading to a love doll factory. The game operates on a timer, and different stores are open at different times of the day. You also need to keep an eye on your cash supply.

The only way to determine whether a woman is one of the escaped sexbots is with actual physical combat … and this is where the game gets a little gross. You can assault any woman you come across, which leads into an interactive sex scene. While still censored, there is quite a bit more nudity here than there was in *Danchizuma no Yuuwaku*. You do need to be mindful of the police, as you can be arrested; you can also be attacked by yakuza. If you meet up with a sex doll without protection, you'll instantly climax, and lose too.

As a sci-fi parody, the game has an amusing premise, but it's unfortunate that its cavalier attitude towards sexual assault is such a major theme. But it is indicative of the unregulated attitude of the early Japanese PC gaming scene, which had little concern for social mores.





It's your job to track down some escaped "pleasure model" androids in this sci-fi parody.

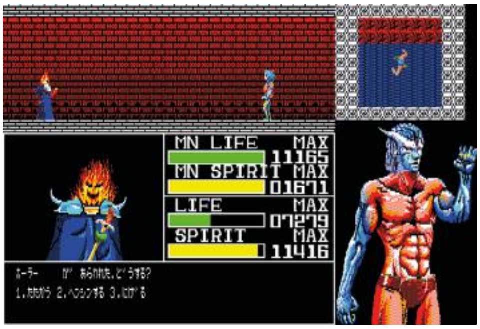
Lost Power

Developer: Winkysoft | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): PC88, X1

The Makai is ruled by a number of demon lords, each vying for higher status on the food chain, obtained by devouring each other. The Demon Lord Tyza has devolved back into a weak human form, so he scales a seven floor tower to fight the other demons and regain what was lost.

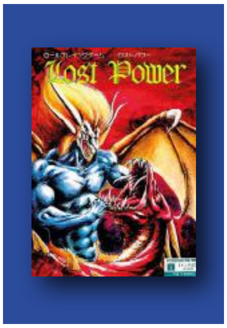
The screen is divided into several windows. A tiny window shows an overhead perspective of the maze, which you navigate with the numpad arrows. A larger window shows a side-scrolling perspective that advances as you move along. Other windows show your stats and main inventory, combatant strength, and the keyboard commands. In the lower right is a huge portrait of Lord Tyza. Not only does he look buff, but as you become stronger, bits of him return to their original demonic forms.

When fighting monsters, combat is displayed in the side-view window and is completely turn-based. You can choose to queue up five commands at a time, allowing you to advance towards (and attack) the enemy or retreat. Beating up regular opponents will increase your max health, and they also drop coloured stones with various uses. More important are the mid-level boss monsters that hang around in set spots, which will drop important items, plus in some cases you'll eat them to increase your demon transformation level.



ホーラー　が あらわれた。どうする?
1.たたかう 2.へンシンする 3.にげる

Lost Power is a very typical mid-'80s RPG, with pretty basic dungeon-crawling, hack-and-slash gameplay, but it has a high concept that allows the player to fill in the narrative gaps. The presentation is also noteworthy, as the enemy portraits are very well done, and even seeing the undie-clad muscleman slowly transform into a ferocious monster is its own particular reward.



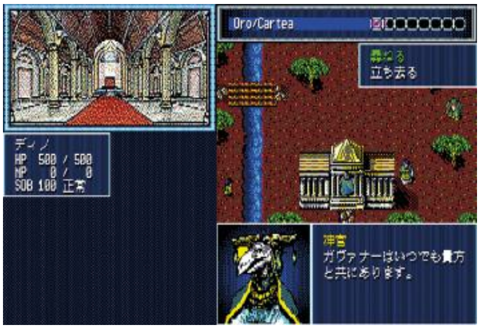
The transforming picture of your character as he turns bit-by-bit from human to demon is striking, even if it does take up rather a big part of the screen.

Digan no Maseki

Developer: Artec | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, MSX2

Digan no Maseki ("The Magic Stone of Digan") begins with a young couple named Dino and Abiria getting married and setting off on their honeymoon. But on their trip, they are told a terrifying fortune: something will tear them apart ... sure enough, when they return home, the bride is afflicted by a mysterious disfiguring disease, so Dino begins a journey to look for a cure.

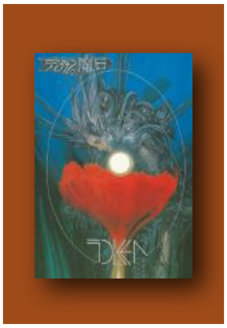
While most RPGs put you into role of a warrior, *Digan no Maseki* hammers home the fact that Dino is just a regular guy. There's a day/night cycle, and you need to eat and sleep to stay healthy. There are monsters that can be killed, but they don't give much money, and injuries can be extremely debilitating, so instead it's better to work a job to get money. There is a variety of diseases, as you can catch colds from NPCs or get an STD if you visit red light districts. Various characters can join you and help in combat, but their world does not revolve around Dino's quest, so they might hop in and out on a whim. Therefore, building relationships is important if you want them to stick around. You can also faff about, work all day, build up a huge bank account and fritter it away on expensive purchases. It's all rather tedious, but among late '80s RPGs, there's nothing quite like it – the closest modern equivalent is something like SEGA's *Shenmue*.



ディノ
HP 500 / 500
MP 0 / 0
SOB 100 正常

神官
ガヴァナーはいつでも貴方と共にあります。

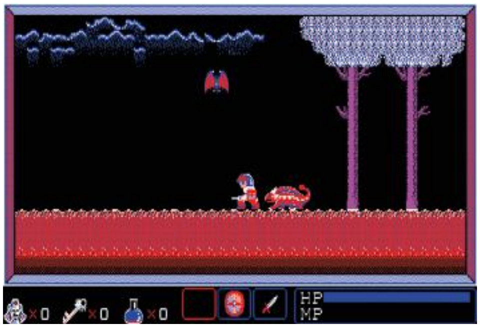
The fantasy world the game takes place in is also richly detailed, filled with characters of different races and religions. While most of the visuals are somewhat basic, there are many illustrations provided by sci-fi artist Naoyuki Kato, which help give this game a very distinctive feel.



Naoyuki Kato's incredible artwork makes this stand out from many other RPGs, Japanese or Western.

Curse of Babylon

Developer: XtalSoft | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): PC88, FM7, C64



XtalSoft was known for relatively hardcore RPGs like *Mugen no Shinzou* and *Fantasian*, but perhaps its staff saw the popularity of action-based games, particularly on the Famicom, and tried their hands at it. This resulted in *Babylon*, a game in which you control a hero who must save the eponymous kingdom from monsters. It's presented from a side-scrolling perspective, and you run around a large map, find items, and kill enemies.

From an RPG standpoint, it's all pretty simple, especially compared to the complexity of Falcom games like *Xanadu*, or even T&E Soft's *Hydlide*. Combat is handled much as in these games though, in that you simply collide with enemies to attack them, and your success is determined by your strength compared to theirs. You do get magic for projectile attacks, at least. So, much of the game is just spent exploring, hunting for keys, items, and other things to make you stronger. Unique to this game is that there are six different songs, that you change at your discretion. It's not a particularly outstanding game, but is an interesting early blend of 2D action-platforming and role-playing, heralding later games like *Zelda II* and *Faxanadu*. It does seem like it was meant for the Famicom, but never got ported there.

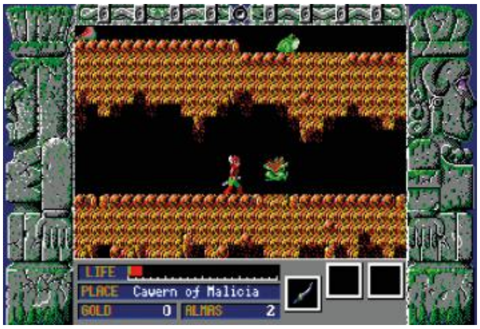
This game is also notable in that it was one of the very few early Japanese RPGs to receive an international release from Kyodai, for which it was renamed *Curse of Babylon* and ported to the Commodore 64. The conversion was handled by Cathryn Mataga, known for Synapse's popular action game *Shamus*. The visuals do suffer a bit due to the computer's chunkier resolution, but it's a good port.

CURSE of BABYLON

Kyodai was a short-lived venture bringing Japanese PC games to the Western market, including this title, *Murder Club*, *Ancient Land of Ys*, and *Psychic War*.

Zeliard

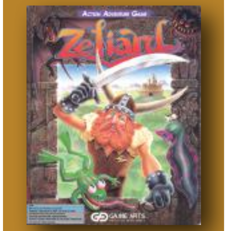
Developer: Game Arts | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): PC88, X1, IBM



Game Arts was well known in the mid-to-late '80s among Japanese PC fans for its technical wizardry, creating action games like *Thexder* and *Silpheed* that were almost on a par with their console counterparts. In 1987, they developed *Zeliard*, an action RPG in which a red-haired hero named Duke Garland must save the kingdom from the evil Jashin by hunting down nine magic jewels, and free the princess Felicia from her Stone Curse.

The game is fairly similar to Falcom's *Ys III*, in that it's a side-scrolling action game, though it predates the latter by about two years. While there are occasional towns where you can talk to folks and purchase equipment, most of the game is spent in caves. Lots and lots of caves. There's a vast, interconnected world to explore, and while there is some visual variation between the caves, it's still pretty samey. Still, the visuals are fairly nice considering the era, and both the controls and the movement are fairly smooth. There are keys for swinging your sword or casting spells, and you press Up to jump, which is always clumsy, especially when aiming your sword slashes upwards. There's no invincibility period after damage either, so you can succumb to enemies pretty quickly. There are no experience points, but you can buy an additional sword and armour, and obtain a number of magic spells to aid your quest.

Zeliard is one of the handful of Japanese PC titles that was ported to IBM PCs and localised into English by Sierra. It's a faithful port, though it's missing the small bits of digitised speech that were impressive in the Japanese original. For some reason, Duke Garland, who wears a winged helmet, is rendered as a Viking on the cover.



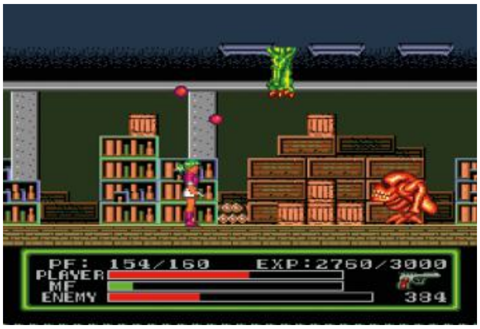
Sierra also published Game Arts' other PC games in North America, as well as Falcom's *Sorcerian*.

War of the Dead (series)

Developer: Fun Project | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): PC88, MSX2, PCE

War of the Dead (a.k.a. *Shiryou Sensen)* takes place in the town of Charney's Hill, which has been overrun by an assortment of gruesome monsters. You control a woman named Lyra Alfon, a member of the S-SWAT (Supernatural and Special Weapon Attack Team) sent to round up survivors. Functionally, the game plays a bit like *Zelda II,* so you explore the town, and the occasional structure within it, from an overhead perspective. When a random encounter occurs, the view switches to a side-on perspective, and you battle enemies, as in an action game. Lyra begins equipped with just a knife and a pistol, though you can obtain other weapons as you go, including bazookas and flamethrowers. She also has psychic powers, though this really only lets you boost your weapon's power. The game is heavily inspired by Hollywood horror-action movies, with characters given names made famous by Hollywood (the priest Carpenter, the teacher Carrie, fellow S-SWAT member Jake Romero, etc.)

There are three different versions of *War of the Dead*: the initial MSX2 version, then PC88 and PC Engine remakes. The balance in each of these is a little rough but in different ways – ammunition is rare in the MSX2 version, but is dropped by enemies in PC Engine version, which also has an explicit levelling system. The PCE version also runs more smoothly, but is less impressive visually and is stuck with gigantic passwords instead of a save system. They're all a bit messy, but horror action RPGs are rare, so it has a unique appeal. A sequel takes place in the city of Sun Dorado, though only for the MSX2 and PC88 platforms. However, it strips out most of the RPG elements.



WAR OF THE DEAD

Though it has a number of issues, the PC Engine port of *War of the Dead,* pictured here, is probably the best version to play.

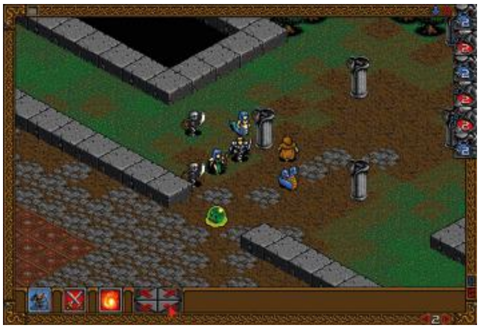
Hiouden (series)

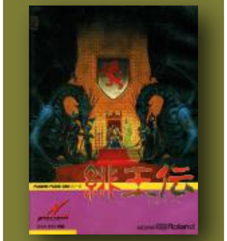
Developer: Wolf Team | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): PC98, FMT, SFC

The main character of *Hiouden: Mamonotachi tono Chikai* ("Legend of the Scarlet Kind: Pact with the Demons") is Richard A. MacIntyre, who has been deposed from his throne by the rival Macaulays. The only one in his castle to escape execution, he makes a pact with a dryad that gives him the ability to summon demons, thereby gaining a dark army to take back his kingdom.

Hiouden isn't technically an RPG, instead being more of a real-time strategy game. The story is divided into several scenarios, as you command Richard and his loyal monsters, overwhelming their enemies. It was originally released for the PC98 and spawned a sequel there, while the first game was ported to the Super Famicom. Due to the interface, it's pretty clumsy with a controller, though it does support mouse use for a control scheme closer to that of the PC game. The action is a bit chaotic to understand easily, regardless, since there's so much going on at once, and the animation is quite choppy.

Ultimately, the *Hiouden* series is more interesting from a historical perspective than in itself. The Wolf Team core development staff included several team members who worked on Namco's *Tales of Phantasia*, including the three – Masaki Norimoto, Yoshiharu Gotanda, and Joe Asanuma – who would break off and form tri-Ace, leading to the *Star Ocean* series. The team also included some other shared staff, including graphic designers and Telenet regular musician Motoi Sakuraba, whose work sounds particularly excellent in the Super Famicom version. In other words, the innovative real-time battle systems of those games can be traced back to this title.





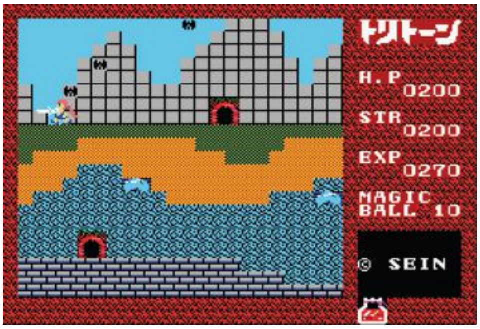
Given the staff involved, the real-time strategy action of *Hiouden* can be seen as a foundation laid for later, more mainstream RPGs like *Tales of Phantasia* and *Star Ocean.*

Tritorn (series)

Developer: Sein Soft | Released: 1985 | Platform(s): PC60, PC88, PC98, X1, FM7, MSX, MSX2, X68

Sein Soft (also known as Zain Soft and Xain Soft) was a shifty game development outfit that cranked out tons of titles, many buggy and unfinished, most of which were rip-offs of more popular games. That's also the case for *Tritorn*, their first noteworthy title, which basically took T&E Soft's *Hydlide* and turned it sideways. But this does also make it one of the very early side-scrolling action RPGs, as it was released in the same month in 1985 as Falcom's *Xanadu*.

It takes place on the island of Luwanda, which has been overrun by the evil Pay-Valusa, and only the heroic Tritorn can stop him. The goal is to explore the land and hunt for items that will allow you to progress. There are many potions to find, which increase various skills, plus shields to increase your defence. Unlike *Hydlide*, *Tritorn* has a separate button for swinging your sword, plus you can toss magical balls at foes. The world is linked together by doors, which will warp you around to different areas. It's quite difficult, as the combat is clumsy and enemies can easily kill you, though there is a memory save/load function that lets you experiment and quickly reload if you get killed.



トリトーン
MSX
SEIN

This was followed up by an MSX2 revision called *Super Tritorn*, which enhanced the graphics and completely changed the map, though it's an inferior game in most respects. Follow-ups included *Tritorn II* and its X68000 port, *Tritorn Special*, which at this point mimicked the look of Falcom games, though were much more poorly programmed. The series ended with *Valusa no Fukushuu*, an X68000 side-scrolling action game that features a warrior who looks a whole lot like Adol from *Ys*.

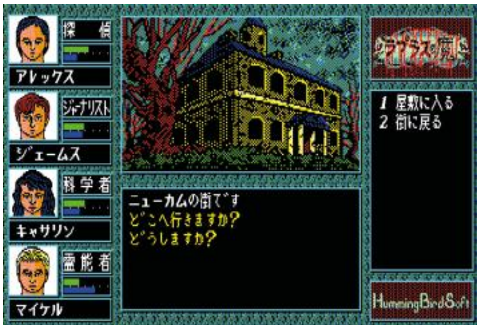
None of Sein Soft's titles made it outside of Japan, which is fine, since they were mostly buggy pieces of junk, though *Tritorn* is at least kind of interesting for being an early side-scrolling action RPG.

Laplace no Ma

Developer: HummingBirdSoft | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, MSX, X68, SFC, PCECD

HummingBirdSoft was known for the *Deep Dungeon* series, comprised of typical *Wizardry*-type dungeon crawlers, but they bucked the trend with *Laplace no Ma* ("Laplace's Demon"), which is influenced by Lovecraftian horror. In 1920s America in the fictional New England town of Newcam, you take a squad of adventurers into the haunted Weathertop Manor. The town is a base where you create characters, buy equipment, and obtain info, while the mansion is a gigantic dungeon.

The character classes are different from those in typical dungeon crawlers – Detectives and Psychics are equivalents to fighters and magicians, but there are also Journalists, who are relatively frail, but can also take pictures of the monsters for sale to the local newspaper, the primary way to generate income. Scientists can use inventions to attack, while Dilettantes use magic. In this game, MPs are not magic points, but rather mental points, which are expended in psychic attacks or when using some of the Scientists' inventions, but are also drained by certain enemy attacks. When their MP hits zero, then a character goes insane, the exact effects differing from version to version, but basically incapacitating them until they are cured. It's a tough game, for sure, but its unique mechanics and terrifying atmosphere are very strong for the era.



ニューカムの街です
どこへ行きますか?
どうしますか?

All of the original PC versions are first-person dungeon crawlers, as is the PC Engine CD port, but the Super Famicom version changes to an overhead perspective. The game is the first instalment in HummingBirdSoft's *Ghost Hunter* series, which also includes *Paracelsus no Maken* (PC98) and *Kurokishi no Kamen* (3DO).

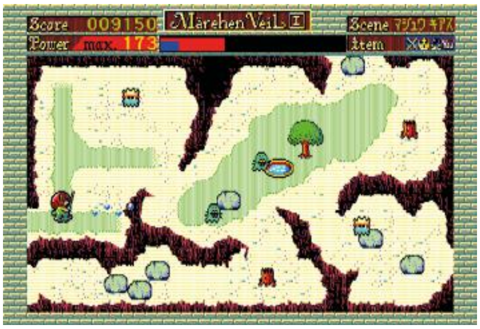
Most versions of *Laplace no Ma* are first-person dungeon crawlers, but these must have been considered to be out of style by the time the Super Famicom port came about.

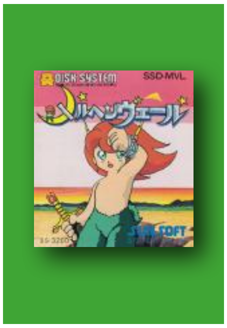
Märchen Veil (series)

Developer: System Sacom | Released: 1985 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, FM7, X1, MSX, FDS

Märchen Veil is a well-remembered action RPG released for many home computers in 1985, as well as the Famicom Disk System. You control the Prince of Felix, a young man who has not only been whisked away to another land, but cursed with the body of a faun-like race called the Veil. With his sword at his side, he explores this foreign realm in order to both return home and regain human form. Though technically an action RPG, *Märchen Veil* is broken down into eight separate levels, each with a specific goal. Most of the time, this involves hunting down specific items and taking them to certain spots. Along the way, you can hunt for both health extensions and weapon power-ups, though it's all somewhat directionless.

Unlike *Hydlide* or *Ys*, the prince can shoot projectiles rather than needing to bump into enemies. However, it's hard to aim at them, and they're not only small, but move pretty quickly. The action is quite clumsy, plus the landscape is filled with pits, which will drain your health unless you can leap out of them. In the FDS version, you can at least jump, which makes dodging enemy attacks a little easier.





Märchen Veil's claim to fame lies in the story scenes between its levels, as the Prince makes his way from one place to the next, begging to find a way to reclaim his human form. Considering many RPGs in 1985 had most of its plot told in the manual, it makes the game more involving. However, the game ends on a downbeat note, which was meant to lead into its sequel. This was only released on the PC98, so players on other platforms were unable to see the conclusion to the prince's tale.

Though this screenshot (above left) is from the PC88 version, the Famicom Disk System port, published by Sunsoft, has cover art more representative of the game (above).

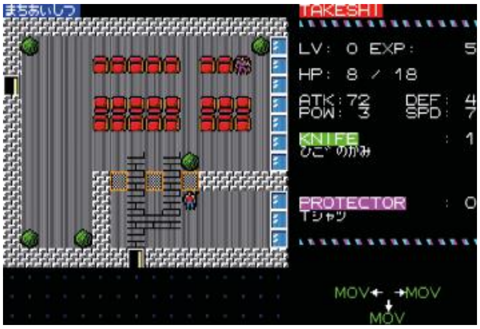
Tokyo / Shanghai / Kowloon Island

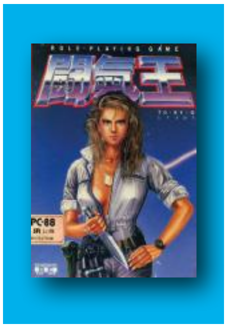
Developer: Starcraft | Released: 1985 | Platform(s): PC88

Stuart Smith was one of the pioneers of early computer role-playing, with a trilogy of games originating on Atari 8-bit computer platforms: *Fracas, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,* and *The Return of Heracles,* along with the *Adventure Construction Set* and its accompanying game, *Rivers of Light*. As in other RPGs of the time, you explore interconnecting rooms, looking for treasure. Friendly characters can join your adventure (and be controlled by other players, if you want), while hostile characters often fight among themselves instead of targetting the player.

Starcraft was a company that published many Western games in Japan, including *Ali Baba.* They then used the engine to create three original games: *Shanghai, Kowloon Island* and *Battle King/Tokyo.* What's interesting is that Smith's own games borrowed from history and mythology, rather than Tolkien or other swords-and-sorcery fiction. These Japanese games use similarly atypical settings, generally set in the future, even though he wasn't involved with any of them.

Shanghai has you exploring a space shuttle that has crashed into the eponymous Chinese city.





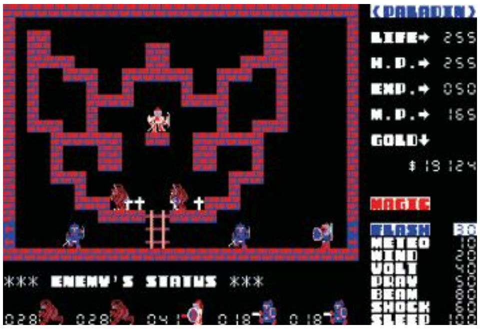
Kowloon Island puts you into the role of a mercenary trying to prevent the spread of a bacterial weapon. And *Tokyo* takes place in a futuristic landscape where Japan has been annihilated by nuclear missiles. The visuals in these are simple, but still more advanced than in Smith's original games.

These weren't the only Japan-only sequels that Starcraft created. SSI's RPG series *Phantasie* had three games in North America, while a fourth one, subtitled *The Birth of Heroes,* was released in Japan in 1991, but never ported back to English PCs.

Starcraft published numerous ports of American PC titles throughout its existence, primarily adventure games like Sierra's *Mystery House,* but also RPGs like Origin's *Ultima.*

Paladin

Developer: Bothtec | Released: 1985 | Platform(s): PC88



PALADIN
君はゴッドを倒せるか!?

Paladin (or "*The Paladin*", in-game) is an early action RPG released by Bothtec in 1985. The English-language introduction tells the tale of how a stranger named God "did all of the evils in the would" [sic], including killing the king and transforming the princess into a swan. The game was developed by Ken Akamatsu while still at high school; he would later become a world famous manga author, thanks to his series *Love Hina* and *Negima!*

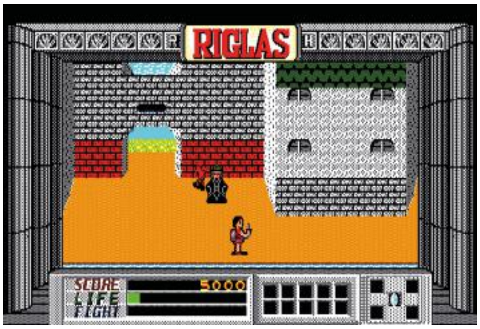
Visually, the game looks a lot like the computer classic *Lode Runner*, with each stage constructed of bricks and filled with ladders, and enemies positioned around. Each level is presented as a single screen, with both an entrance and an exit (except for the very first level, which only has an exit). It uses a simple bump system for mêlée combat, though you have magic too. You technically don't have to kill all of the enemies to proceed, but doing so will give you experience and cash. Some screens have shops where you can buy things, get hints, and gamble to earn more money. There are 100 screens in total. In the next-to-last screen you fight a three-headed dragon before reaching the finale, in which you square off against God himself. Then you can backtrack to an earlier level to find the swan princess.

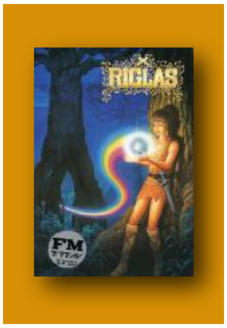
It's a pretty decent game, considering its vintage. Combat is clumsy, and much of the game simply involves finding or buying the proper equipment and managing your money, but it's definitely less confusing than the typical computer RPG of the era, plus it's an early example of one with God as the ultimate foe.

Like many early Japanese titles, *Paladin* was a successful entry in a game-writing contest. Who knows what games Ken Akamatsu could've developed if he hadn't followed a career in manga!

Riglas

Developer: Random House | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, FM7, X1





Most RPGs of the '80s utilised an overhead view or a first-person perspective, while a select few (such as the Falcom titles *Xanadu* and *Romancia*) were side-scrollers. *Riglas* is one of the few that uses an oblique perspective, which is technically side-scrolling but lets you walk upwards and downwards, commonly called belt-scrolling" when applied to beat-'em-ups like *Double Dragon*.

Riglas is a continent largely ruled by two races: the Miria and the Galt, who are at constant war with each other. Caught in the middle is a minority race, the Osborn, oppressed by both sides. You control an Osborn named Mei, who leaves his village to find the mysterious secret of Bershuna, in order to free his people. Much of the game is spent wandering, running quests to find items, and beating up enemies to increase your score, and thus your life meter. Unlike *Ys* and *Hydlide*, there's actually an attack button that swings your short and unwieldy sword. While much of the game has a typical fantasy setting, the finale introduces sci-fi elements like robots, a recurring theme in some early RPGs, like *Ultima II* and *Hydlide 3*. Though the dialogue is terse, it changes quite a bit throughout the game, depending on what you've seen and done. Plus, the scrolling is pretty smooth for PC hardware – quite a technical achievement.

The game was programmed by Kazurou Morita, who founded Random House, and is known for crafting high-level artificial intelligence for shogi games. The story also ties into the works of author Yuuto Ramon, taking place in the same universe as *Minelvaton Saga*, *Gdleen*, and *Digan no Maseki*.

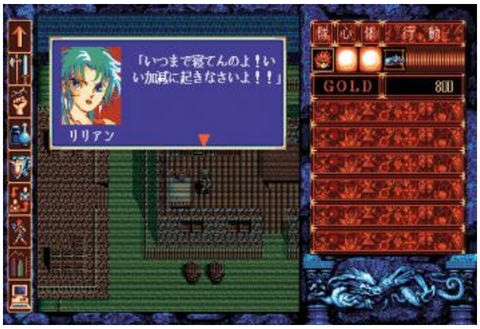
Kazurou Morita, founder of *Riglas* developer Random House, was something of a genius, and had been one of Enix's star programmers, along with Chunsoft founder Koichi Nakamura.

Burai (series)

Developer: Riverhill Soft | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, FM7, MSX, MCD, SFC, PCECD

Riverhill Soft was mostly known for adventure games like *J.B. Harold Murder Club*, but it also dabbled in RPGs, like its *Burai* series. Written by author Takeo Iijima, the premise is similar to that of *Dragon Quest IV*, despite pre-dating it by a couple of months. In the land of Kypros, eight warriors are chosen to venture from their homelands to stop the resurrection of the dark lord Daar.

The heroes include Zan Hayate, a Robin Hood-esque character; Sakyou Maboroshi, the human form of a dragon god; Gonza Prott, a member of the Wash tribe, who look like humans wearing animal suits, hunting for his parents' murderers along with his little sister Maimai; Lilian Lancelot, an acupuncturist; Kuuk Lo Tam, a boy who can talk to animals; Romal Sebastian VI, a lizard-like Lizaz noble, who ran away to join the circus; and Alex Heston, a fortune teller. The story was too big to fit into a single game, so it was divided into two. The first game features individual chapters for each character before they join up; the second game has them pair up for a few more chapters before they regroup for the finale.



リリアン

「いつまで寝てんのよ！いい加減に起きなさいよ！！」

BURAI
ブライ
SEGA

The game plays like a typical late '80s JRPG. However, certain abilities are represented by glowing orbs; when these weaken, eventually they shatter. The original PC versions are obviously a little basic, but the ports to the consoles, particularly the CD versions, polish things up.

The character designs are by Shingo Araki (*Saint Seiya*) and collaborator Michi Himeno, with music by all-female rock group SHOW-YA, in the first game, and Hiromi Imae (formerly of rock band Crystal King) in the second.

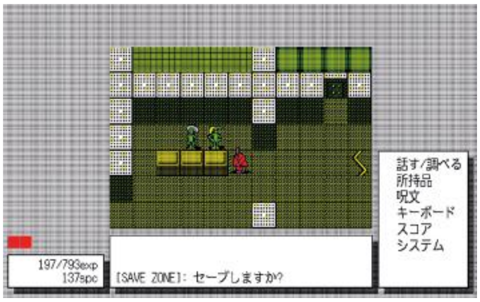
The diverse cast of characters in *Burai* make for an interesting group of travelling companions.

Kumdor no Ken

Developer: ASCII | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): WIN, MAC

As the galaxy's Master of Blind Touch, you're about to visit the backwater planet Kumdor on vacation. Right before your voyage, a Kumdoran arrives and urges you to save them from global catastrophe. All seems fine until you get drunk en route, right before your ship's systems fail. Though you survive the crash landing, all your money, experience, and keyboard keys are gone. It's time to journey across the land, facing secrets and dangers even the locals fear, all to answer the stranger's call and return home.

Imaginative edutainment! *Kumdor no Ken* ("Sword of Kumdor") teaches touch-typing through meticulous *Dragon Quest*-style combat, exploration, and town-dungeon-town progression. You start off with only the F, J, and Space keys for menus and navigation; acquiring more keys lets you handle new battles and puzzles. Typing challenges (except in tutorials) gradually but constantly drain your health, hurting more if you mistype. Fast, accurate touch-typing is essential to survive and progress, as you encounter *Kumdor*'s troubles, save its civilisation, and prevent a galactic pandemic.



[SAVE ZONE]: セーブしますか?

Alongside *Kumdor*, Michiaki Tsubaki created another series, *INSIDERS*, in which you must escape your own PC, à la *Tron*. ASCII released the games within mooks, each containing hints and side materials for users. *Kumdor*'s mix of addictive play, absurd, evocative aesthetics, and world-building, akin to the *Mother* series, made it a cult classic in Japan. While *INSIDERS* pushes you to learn difficult electronics and computer science to win, Kumdor's ease and linearity make it excellent for teaching anyone touch-typing, a skill then uncommon in Japan.

***Kumdor no Ken*'s unique, experimental direction typifies the creativity of many overlooked Japanese PC RPGs and their creators.**

Gage

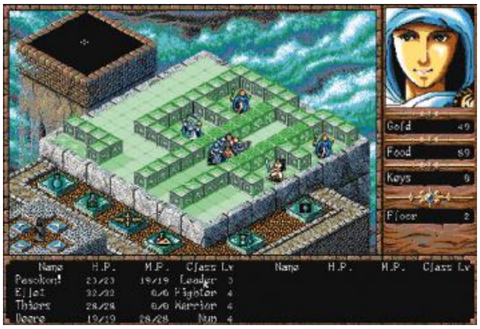
Developer: Mindware | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): PC98

You awaken within the tower of "Mick Albert", equipped with little but robes and a scrying scepter. Albert, a stand-in for *Gage*'s creator Mikito Ichikawa, beckons you to assemble a party, loot chests to supply yourselves, and reach the top of his trap-filled, monster-infested tower – or perish like many before you.

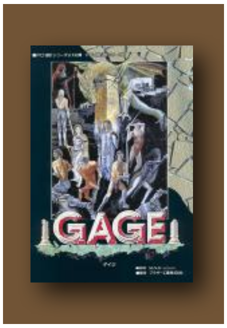
With its detailed isometric view and procedurally-generated levels, *Gage* presents dungeon crawling in miniature diorama. You play a Leader unit who can recruit party members, manage inventory, and see ten spaces ahead on the map, using magic. However capable you and your party may seem, resources remain scarce, stowed near dangerous foes. To defeat said enemies, the game offers a typical RPG class roster: fighters, healers, and mages a-plenty. *Gage*'s automatic turn-based combat involves micromanaging mêlée and ranged combatants, all while conserving items, equipment, keys, and escape routes.

Gage's greatest challenge, however, is map traversal. You have neither formations nor automatic party regrouping. Micromanaging each unit requires careful mouse clicks. Every bend on every floor can mean rearranging your party for a tricky encounter, or just to keep your companions on-screen. This makes things fiddly for some players. For others, it hardly dents the game's methodical pace and deftly illustrated atmosphere. The game also features music from Yuzo Koshiro, providing an experimental orchestral score preceding his work on *Beyond Oasis*.

Mindware struggled to develop and publish games. Afterward, Ichikawa focused on pinball titles and remakes of classic Japanese PC-era releases.



Name	H.P.	M.P.	Class	Lv	Name	H.P.	M.P.	Class	Lv
Pasokon!	23/23	19/19	Leader	3					
Elliot	32/32	6/6	Fighter	4					
Thiors	28/28	6/6	Warrior	4					
Veere	19/19	28/28	Nun	4					



***Gage* is a dungeon crawler that is simultaneously familiar and unique. Plus, some of the sound effects are straight out of *Streets of Rage*.**

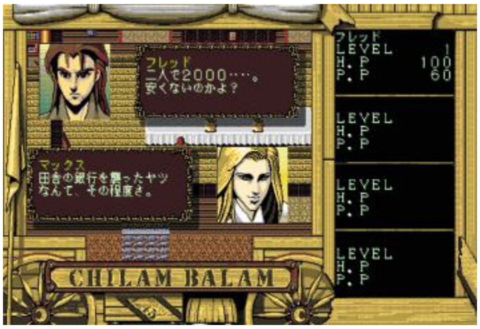
Libros de Chilam Balam

Developer: Right Stuff | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): PC98

The books of Chilam Balam are a record of the history of the Mayan civilisation, and they're the central topic of this PC RPG from Right Stuff. Taking place in the United States right after the end of the Civil War, its protagonist is a young cowboy named Fred, living in the largely lawless Wild West. His childhood friend, Christina, is kidnapped, and the ransom note tucked behind his father's old gun. Obviously, this is no mere firearm, and it plays into a larger story involving cults and ancient gods. While the story begins as a fairly standard Western, it delves into the supernatural, having been inspired by HP Lovecraft's Cthulhu stories, woven in with Aztec lore.

Unlike the unusual battle systems found in *Emerald Dragon* and *Alshark*, this has a pretty standard one in most ways, its closest equivalent being *Phantasy Star II*. Battles are viewed from an over-the-shoulder perspective, on a generic black background, with enemies placed on a grid. They can move back and forth between the front and back rows, which determines what kind of weapon you'll need to effectively damage them. The story is pretty good too, with a large roster of characters. In addition to the gunslingers, you're also joined by characters like Luka, a Native American who escaped ritual sacrifice; Sylvia, a fortune teller; and Vivienne, a magician who loves cats.

The Wild West setting is extremely uncommon in JRPGs – the few other examples include *Wild Arms* and *Shadow Hearts: From the New World* – so *Libros de Chilam Balam* is noteworthy for that aspect alone. It would probably have made a good console port, but it was left in obscurity on PC platforms.


フレッド
二人で2000・・・・。
安くないのかよ？

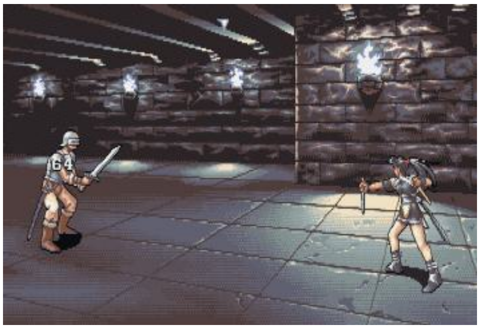
マックス
田舎の銀行を襲ったヤツ
なんて、その程度さ。

CHILAM BALAM

There aren't many JRPGs that take place in the Wild West, and the ones that do often make interesting use of the setting. *Libros de Chilam Balam* is no exception.

Kuro no Ken

Developer: Forest | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): PC98, PS1



Blade of the Darkness
黒の剣

Kuro no Ken, which also has the translated English subtitle *Blade of the Darkness*, takes place in the nation of Kreutzen, which was long ago devastated by a vicious black dragon. This was defeated using the eponymous weapon, which disappeared after it served its purpose, but evil forces are attempting to resurrect the fallen dragon, so the sword must again be found. The story focuses on two heroes – magic-wielding kunoichi Shinobu and armour-clad swordfighter Kayes – who initially are controlled separately, before joining forces for their adventure.

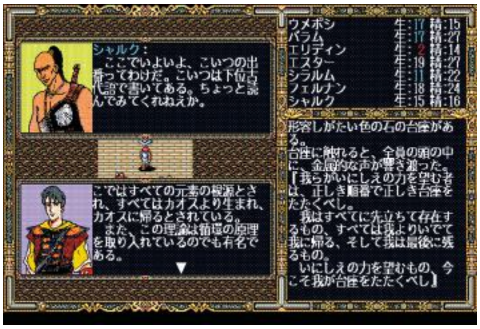
This is a pretty standard JRPG, though its battle scenes are notable for their large character sprites, which are viewed from an over-the-shoulder angle. There's little about it that's particularly original, but the story is fairly decent, if mostly because this type of dark fantasy was fairly rare among console RPGs at the time. It might be a little too simple though, considering you only ever control the two heroes in battle, and there's no really interesting upgrade or battle mechanics – it feels a little bit dated for a 1995 release.

The game was developed by Forest, who otherwise only put out adult titles, including the 2D fighter *Ningyou Tsukai*, which was used as the basis for the IBM PC game *Metal & Lace: The Battle of the Robo Babes*. With its scantily clad characters and occasional partial nudity, it's more licentious than most other console RPGs of the time, though it's tame compared to other PC games. Indeed, nothing had to be cut out for its 1997 PlayStation port, which is mostly the same, though it does add in plenty of voiced dialogue.

While somewhat behind the times when it was released, *Kuro no Ken* is still a valiant effort for a company otherwise known for nothing but porn games.

Sword World (series)

Developer: T&E Soft | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): PC98, SFC

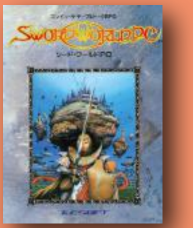


シャルク：
ここでいよいよ、こいつの出番ってわけだ。こいつは下位古代語で書いてある。ちょっと読んでみてくれねえか。

こではすべての元素の根源とされ、すべてはカオスより生まれ、カオスに帰るとされている。
また、この理論は循環の原理を取り入れているのでも有名である。

ウメボシ 生:17 精:15
バラム 生:17 精:27
エリディン 生:2 精:14
エスター 生:19 精:27
シラルム 生:11 精:22
フェルナン 生:18 精:24
シャルク 生:15 精:16

形容しがたい色の石の台座がある。
台座に触れると、全員の頭の中に、金属的な声が響き渡った。
「我らがいにしえの力を望む者は、正しき順番で正しき台座をたたくべし。
我はすべてに先立ちて存在するもの、すべては我よりいでて我に帰る、そして我は最後に残るもの。
いにしえの力を望むもの、今こそ我が台座をたたくべし」



Sword World is a tabletop RPG designed specifically for the Japanese market. It was designed by Ryo Mizuno, the author of *Record of Lodoss War*, which itself was based on a replay serialised in the magazine *Comptiq*, itself based on *Dungeons and Dragons* and other tabletop RPGs. The first game tie-in, *Sword World PC*, was created by XtalSoft and T&E Soft. In typical fantasy RPG fashion, you create your character and then set off on a journey with other adventurers you meet. It's relatively open-ended, with several different scenarios that you can undertake, with the ultimate goal being to take down the dark priest Maazel Soglan. Since it's based on the rules of the tabletop game, it works differently from most other computer RPGs, in that fighting doesn't gain you much experience – indeed, it should be avoided – whereas scenario completion benefits you, by strengthening your hero. When you do engage in battle, the game shifts to a turn-based system in which each character can move a certain number of squares, and then attack.

The PC version was intended to have 100 scenarios, but this had to be cut down by about half for the final release. For the Super Famicom version, titled *Sword World SFC*, the designers reconstructed everything, deleting some scenarios but reinstating some of the ones originally cut, for an overall better experience. (A TRPG book was released featuring all of the scenarios.) Since some scenarios are mutually exclusive, you need to play the game three times to see everything. An SFC-exclusive sequel called *Inishie no Kyojin Densetsu* ("Legend of the Ancient Giant") features a brand new story but plays similarly.

***Sword World* is basically *Dungeons and Dragons* with its serial numbers filed off, made by hardcore Japanese tabletop role-playing fans.**

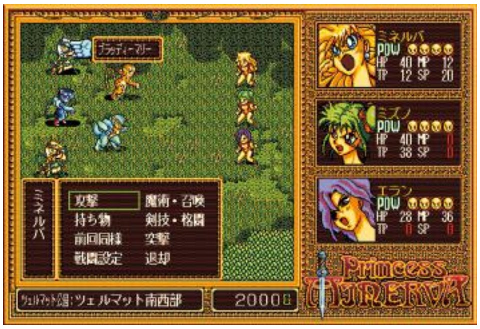
Princess Minerva

Developer: Riverhill Soft | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): PC98, PCECD, SFC

One day, Princess Minerva of the Whistler Kingdom got bored, and decided to form an elite squadron of eight female bodyguards. While at first this squadron acts as little more than an entourage, eventually the land is threatened by the sorceress Dynastar, who sends her own demon generals against Minerva and her crew.

Originally released for the PC98 by Riverhill Soft, then later ported to the PC Engine CD and Super Famicom, *Princess Minerva* mostly plays like any only regular JRPG, except that, with so many characters, the parties are broken up into three teams of three. When battles occur, which team actually fights is totally random. If one is wiped out, then one of the teams in waiting will hop in to take their place.

The idea was generated by Red Entertainment, who had found great success with their offbeat *Tengai Makyou* PC Engine series, and knew how to come up with ideas that resonated with their audience. In *Princess Minerva*'s case, that audience is mostly boys, adolescent in age (or at heart), given that the game's characters are mostly women in scanty outfits. Nearly the entire cast is female, ranging from Minvera's bodyguards through Dynastar's underlings to most of the random enemies. There are succubus-like demons, there are women dressed in S&M outfits, there are girls in bear, dragon, cow, and bee costumes, and even female kappas. The character designs are attractive and the sprites are very well designed, so the game fulfils its purpose fairly well. In addition to the games, there was also a novel series, as well as an anime OVA, which unlike the rest, was translated into English.



Though it originated on the PC, *Princess Minerva* is better known for its console ports. The PC Engine CD version also has a bit of nudity, due to NEC's looser restrictions for this platform.

Wind's Seed

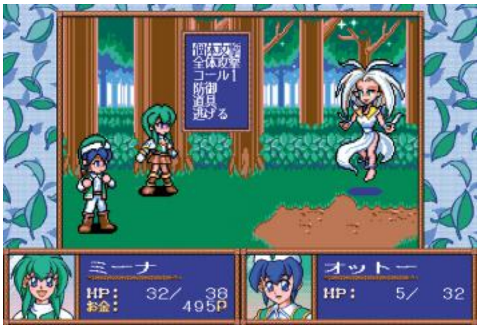
Developer: Compile | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): PC98

It's a regular day for siblings Mina and Otto, tasked with foraging for forest offerings to give at their town's upcoming festival. But things go awry: after leaving their home, they witness their older brother being kidnapped by the treacherous Black Unicorn group. It's up to them to set things right!

Wind's Seed is much the other JRPGs released by Compile through their Disc Station periodicals: cute, easy to learn, and rather short overall. It stands out due to its side-scrolling perspective and more complex combat system, centring around the siblings' ability to Call upon inner powers. Either character can Call three times, with each instance giving them access to unique command tiers. When fully charged, Mina and Otto can even unleash powerful special moves upon enemies. All this ties into an ordinary, but polished, turn-based battle flow, paced to showcase the game's whimsical characters.

Towns and other respites break up the pace between overworld and dungeon explorations. While its NPCs and story characters are quite inviting, *Wind's Seed* doesn't shy away from darker undertones. The world around you is full of territorial wildlife, as well as lowlifes like the enigmatic Black Unicorn. Some characters, such as hometown totem pole Gillespie, flaunt foul mannerisms around Mina and Otto when they can.

The team behind *Wind's Seed* would go on to make many worthwhile games for the Disc Station during Compile's waning days. But *Wind's Seed* remains uniquely representative of their past and future principles, all while pushing the PC98's graphical potential.



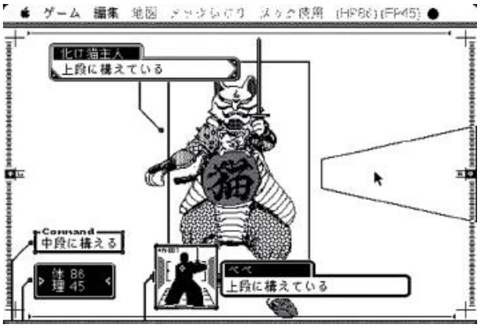
Like most Compile Disc Station games, *Wind's Seed* is short – it can be beaten in an hour or two – but has quite a bit of charm stuffed into that space.

Samurai Mech

Developer: Hulinks | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): MAC

Samurai Mech takes place in the distant future, and is a science fiction tale blended with traditional Japanese designs. The eponymous hero is a samurai mixed with *RoboCop*, more or less; he ventures through Oedo, a gigantic artificial city in space, to investigate a troupe of mysterious ninjas. It plays like a traditional JRPG for the most part, though it's controlled entirely with the mouse. Battles are fought one-on-one, and you can choose different spots to attack the enemy, with different stances having different vulnerabilities. In addition to levelling up your character, you can also gain blueprints to upgrade your cybernetic gear.

The game comes courtesy of Hulinks, a company that dabbled mostly in assorted computer applications; its only previous game experience was porting a few SSI strategy games to the PC98. *Samurai Mech* and its sequel were their only original games, and also seem to be among the few Japanese-developed games for the Macintosh – by this point in 1992, computer gaming generally used the PC98, before shifting to Windows a few years later.



So given that lack of experience, it's shocking how cool *Samurai Mech* looks – the field screens are basic but they have the "future Japan" aesthetic down pat, while the artistry for the hero and enemies in the fight scenes is fantastic, as are the mechanical designs. It uses the monochromatic colour scheme of early Macintoshes to great effect, creating a game that's unlike anything else out there. The sequel supports colour and while it doesn't look quite as striking, the illustrations still stand out.

SAMURAI MECH

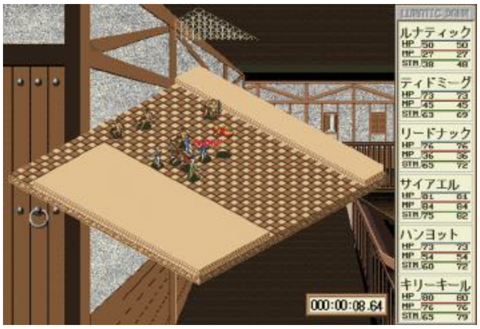
The incredible monochromatic visual design of *Samurai Mech* makes it a unique artefact.

Lunatic Dawn (series)

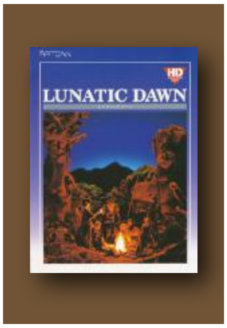
Developer: Artdink | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): PC98, PCFX, WIN, PS1, PS2

Known today more for its experimental PS1 games than its history of popular, award-winning Japanese PC simulation titles, Artdink created *Lunatic Dawn* more as an RPG simulation than an RPG proper. Like System Soft's RPG sim-game, *Tir Na Nog*, *Lunatic Dawn* has some basic plot hooks and world-building to offer. Both series, however, focus more on freeform exploration, character-building, and dungeon crawling, compared to their contemporaries.

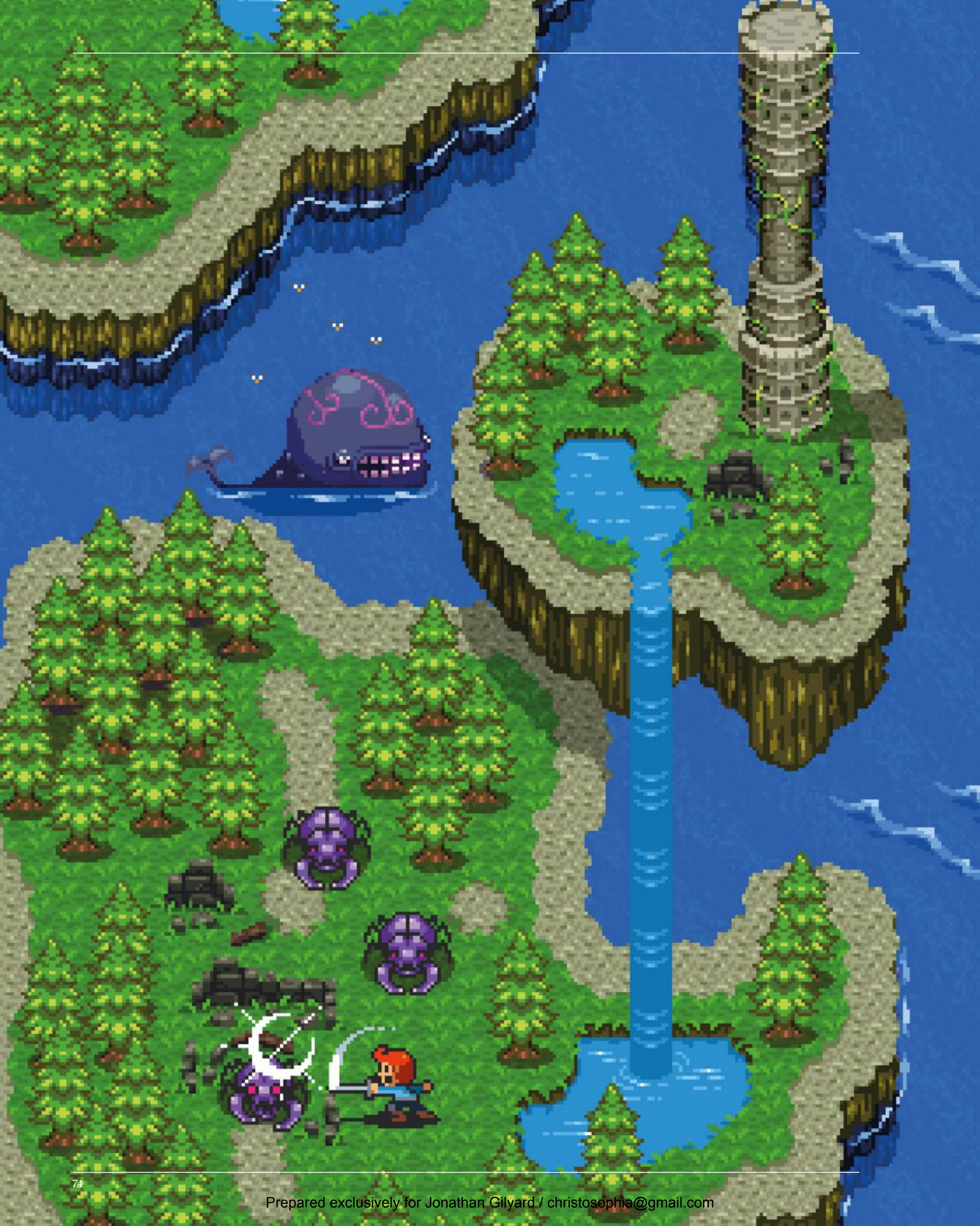
The first two games, released in the early '90s, start with creating characters, buying items and equipment, recruiting party members, and accepting quests. Depending on the game, various aspects are also procedurally generated. Wordy menus with detailed Western-style pixel art replace the typical town exploration of JRPG games. Overworld exploration entails moving your party's icon across various types of terrain, evading or meeting other symbols for areas or encounters. Outside of quests you can accept in towns, there's no obvious goal to a regular *Lunatic Dawn* playthrough. There's a whole world to explore, much loot to plunder, and many foes waiting to slaughter your avatar and hapless party.



The third and fourth games, released in the late '90s, changed with the times to resemble point-and-click action RPGs, a little more like *Diablo* but with less of a focus on straight dungeon crawling. The PlayStation exclusive *Lunatic Dawn Odyssey* returned to the older format, slightly updated, while *Lunatic Dawn Tempest* for the PlayStation 2 shifted to a first-person perspective, as used in the *King's Field* games.



The original *Lunatic Dawn* generated almost everything on the fly, making for a uniquely tailored experience.



Falcom

There were a number of companies that specialised in RPGs in the early days, like Koei and XtalSoft, as considered in the previous chapter. But one of the earliest was Nihon Falcom (or just Falcom), which was named after the Millennium Falcon from *Star Wars*. Founded by Masayuki Kato in 1981, it established itself as a personal computer retail shop called Computer Land Tachikawa in Tokyo, mostly selling imported Apple II PCs. However, they quickly began developing their own software for the then newly-released NEC PC88 platform.

Much of their early RPG output came courtesy of Yoshio Kiya, who first created *Panorama Tou*, before working on the *Dragon Slayer* series, a very loose set of RPGs connected only by a few common references. The second game in this series, *Xanadu*, became wildly popular, for PC software, which helped catapult the firm to fame within the community.

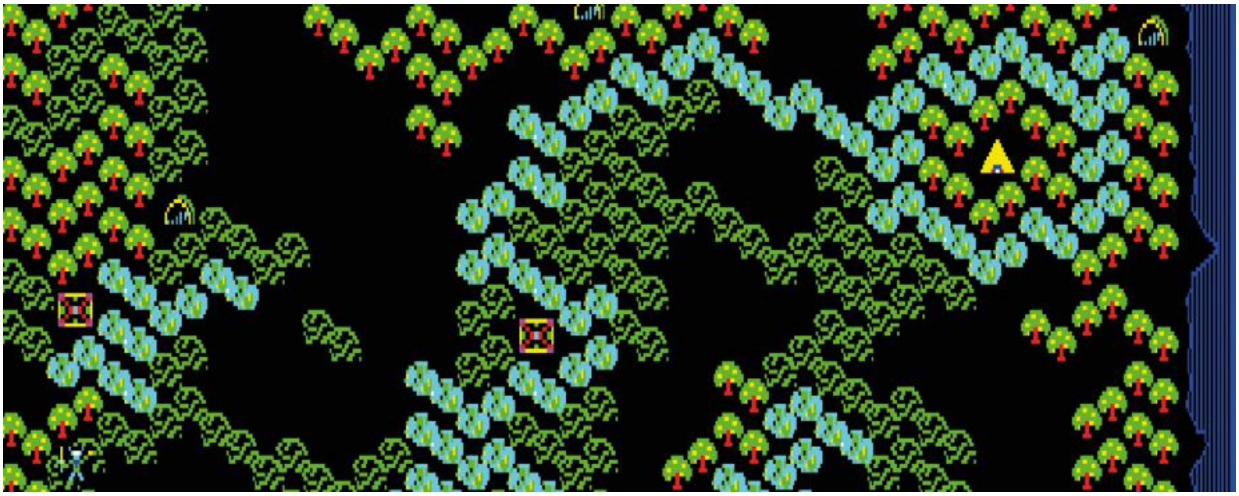
However, it was their 1987 game *Ys I: Ancient Ys Vanished* that brought them wider recognition. With an interesting story, fast action (for a PC game), and a brilliant soundtrack, it quickly enthralled the PC audience. When it was converted for the PC Engine/TurboGrafx-16 CD, it was further enhanced and used as a killer app for the system; it was even bundled with certain hardware configurations in North America, where fans and critics widely praised its cinematics and amazing synthesised music. The series currently has ten entries, along with various remakes of previous games.

Music plays a big part in Falcom games, most of it credited to the in-house JDK Band. Comprised of many members over the decades, this band developed some of the finest FM-synthesised music on the market, and often published arranged albums using live instruments. Many of these had a hard rock bent to them, distinctively different from the music of *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*, two other big hitters in video game soundtracks.

Unlike Square and Enix, both companies that began in home computers before quickly transitioning to consoles, Falcom mostly stayed with PC software for much of its lifetime. It was, however, eager to license out many of their titles to other parties for conversion, which is why the first few *Ys* games can be found, in often wildly different form, on over a dozen platforms Their staff often dabbled in console development, but it wasn't until the 2006 PSP port of their 2004 game *Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky* that this really took off, at which point they abandoned the PC space in favour of portables, and eventually consoles. And that's mostly where their focus lies nowadays, along with continuing the *Ys* series.

Falcom has gone through a few iterations over the years. Many of the staff left in the late '80s and early '90s, including their star developers. Yoshio Kiya left the company for greener pastures, while Masaya Hashimoto and Tomoyoshi Miyazaki, two of the key staff behind the first three *Ys* games, left the company to found Quintet, makers of *ActRaiser* and other action RPGs, like *Illusion of Gaia* and *Terranigma*. Kazunari Tomi, formerly of XtalSoft, also left, to form Studio Alex, the creator of the *Lunar* series; while he was not involved in the *Ys* games, it does rather shamelessly borrow some aspects, including floating cities and reincarnated goddesses. Falcom puttered along through the late '90s and early 2000s, mostly releasing Windows ports of their older games, before rejuvenating the *Ys* series, along with other PC titles like *Zwei* and *Xanadu Next*, some of which eventually made it into English courtesy of XSeed. But it was the aforementioned *Trails in the Sky* that signalled their rebirth, drawing in fans internationally; these may not be large in number but they remain extraordinarily devoted. From 2007 onwards, the company has been guided by Toshihiro Kondo, a fan living the dream of working for (and eventually leading) his favourite developer.

Red haired heroes? Skyscraper towers? Floating islands in the sky? These are all essential aspects of the *Ys* series.



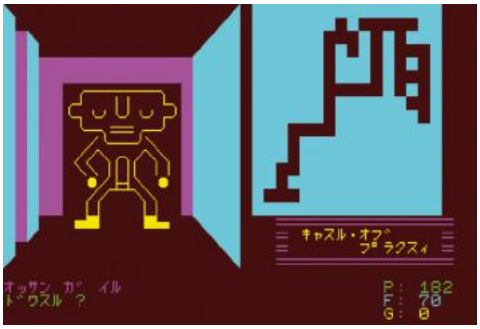
Panorama Tou

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1983 | Platform(s): PC88

As noted already, both the definition of a JRPG (does the term include, for example, Koei's "simulation" games?) and the identity of the first JRPG (that is to say, not a type-in program or a port of a Western game) are debated. Many, however, point to Nihon Falcom's *Panorama Tou* ("Panorama Island"), released in 1983 and developed by Yoshio Kiya, as the first such game.

The packaging and the title screen show a sword-wielding woman in a bikini against an exotic backdrop ... but is as to be expected, the reality of the game is far less exciting. Your goal is to explore the depths of the pyramid on the eponymous island, though things are never easy for would-be adventurers. The entire map is shown on the screen, divided into hexes, but it's filled with traps. As you move around, you may fall into pits (probably a LOT of pits), or come under attack by snakes or lions. Luckily, some of the aboriginals are friendly and will help you out if you call for them. Any type of interaction, including combat, is shown in a tiny window in the bottom right corner of the screen, so you may need to squint to see much of anything. Supplies are limited, so you must either scavenge for food or purchase some in one of the towns.

There's a river dividing up of the island, inhabited by a creature that looks a lot like the Loch Ness monster. If you manage to catch the attention of the ferryman, he'll take you across the river. There's also a network of tunnels that you can enter, providing you have a flashlight and the batteries to power it. These, and the few other dungeons, are presented from the first-person perspective, as in the early *Ultima* games. Many of the enemy and character graphics are made from simple shapes, and there's a certain charm to them.



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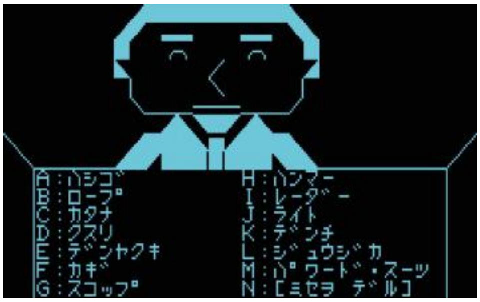
Panorama Tou was programmed in BASIC, which means that not only is every action extremely sluggish, but there are also substantial load times when you do much of anything. The game is quite ambitious, given that it's trying to represent the struggles of exploring a hostile island, but the constant pitfalls and ever-dwindling resources make it extremely difficult to get anywhere. Still, it was a historical landmark, especially considering it's the first RPG in Falcom's library. However, unlike the later *Dragon Slayer* games, *Panorama Tou* was never ported or upgraded – perhaps it's just too dated.



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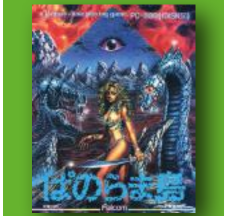
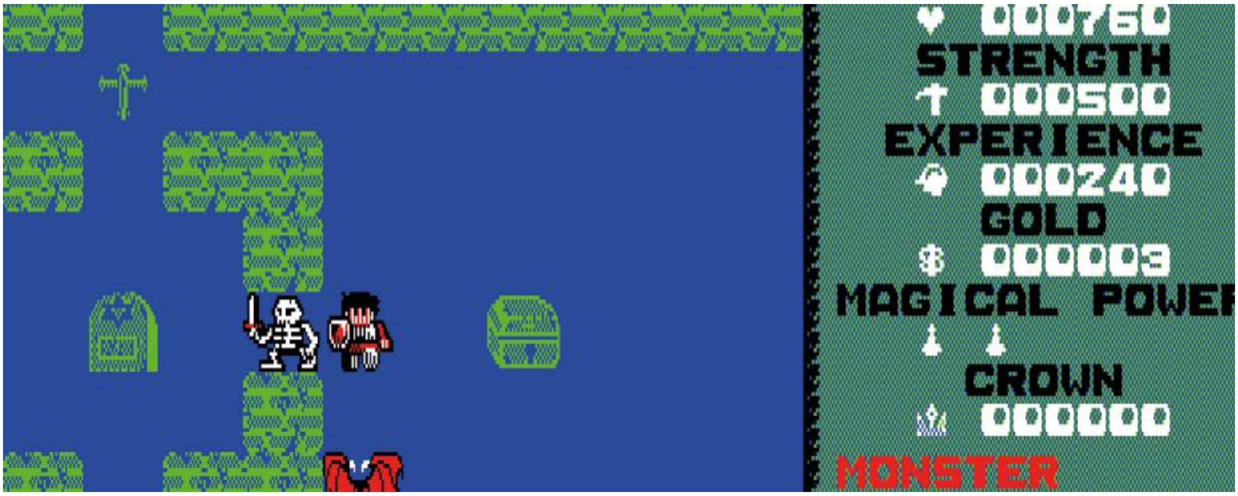


***Panorama Tou* was one of Falcom's many titles to be released in 1983, alongside text adventure *Horror House*. *Galactic Wars 1*, their first game, was released in 1982.**

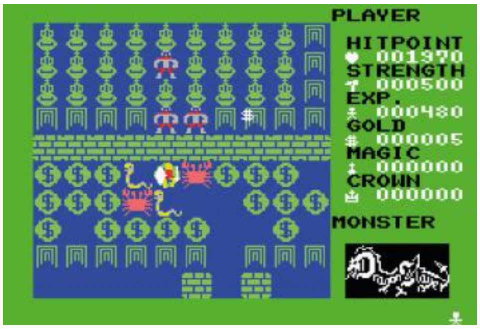


Dragon Slayer

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1984 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, X1, MSX, GB, SAT

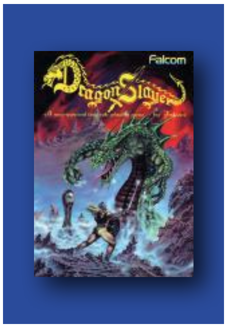
Dragon Slayer is the catch-all name given to a series of RPGs designed by Yoshio Kiya. Developed after *Panorama Tou*, there are technically eight entries in this "series", though there's little connection between them, beyond some small references. The game was the result of a competition between Kiya and another Falcom employee, Tadanobu Inoue. Kiya's version won, and received retail publication, while the other version was published as a type-in program in *LOGIN* magazine. The PC88 version by Inoue has a similar concept, though it's much simpler; it's easy to see why Kiya's version won. The latter game was inspired by the American Apple II game *The Caverns of Freitag* by David Shapiro, released in 1982, which is another early action RPG with similar visual and playing styles that also involves exploring a dungeon in order to slay a dragon.

The inaugural entry, which is, of course, just titled *Dragon Slayer*, was released for an assortment of Japanese PCs including the PC88 (pictured above) and MSX (above right). It takes place entirely within a dungeon, and, obviously, there's a dragon waiting to be slain. But at the outset, your poor hero is in no condition to do it, and assuming you happen upon the creature, you'll be absolutely slaughtered. So, this ultimate goal requires you to explore the levels and find power stones to increase your strength, and coins to expand your HP. Handily, your hero lives in the dungeon, and you can actually pick up your home and move it around – this is useful, since you need to deliver the items to your home before they actually make you stronger. Magic potions will also allow you to cast spells, allowing you to break down walls, warp across the dungeon, save the game, or bring up a map. Items can be found, like crosses to turn you invincible (though you can't attack), and rings, which let you pick up heavy objects. Certain versions include a bizarre mishmash of enemies, including television sets and kangaroos.

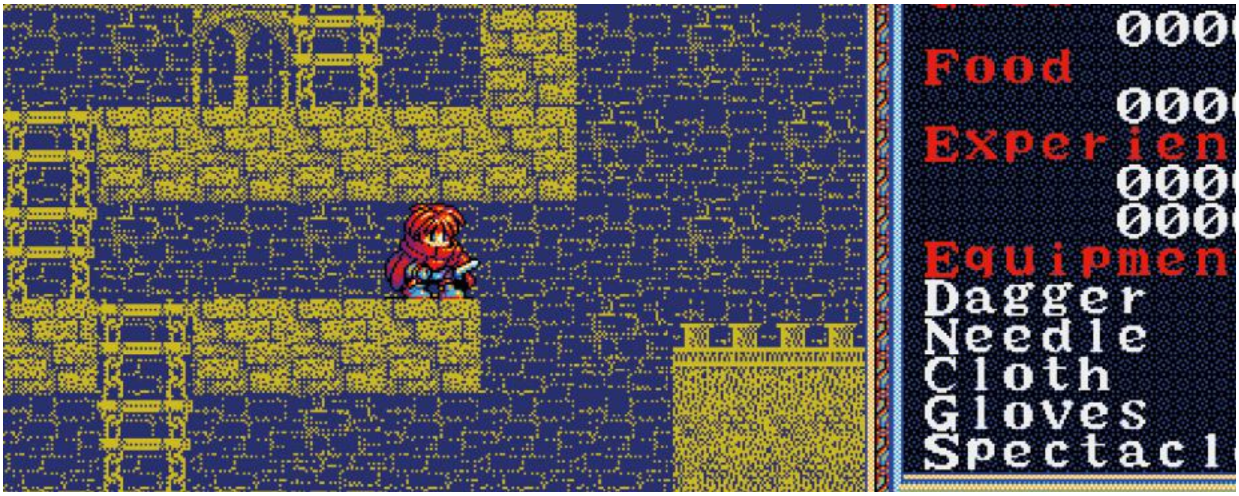


The game is certainly an improvement over Kiya's previous work, though it's still quite basic. Movement is handled clunkily, as you move tile-by-tile, and combat involves characters smashing into each other, while you hope the gods of statistics are on your side. Each of the many versions of *Dragon Slayer* has a different dungeon, with certain versions allowing you to make your own. The difficulty balance is rough, as enemies are both aggressive and substantially more powerful than you at the outset, plus they can trap you in narrow hallways. Sessions can last a significant amount of time, as you slowly amass the power you need to actually beat a level.

Dragon Slayer later saw a port to the Game Boy, though it lacks a save function and has only a couple of maps. A *Gaiden* game was created for the Game Boy by another company, but it's unrelated, and is more of a typical *Dragon Quest*-style title. It also appears in remade form alongside *Ys* and *Xanadu* in the *Falcom Classics* package on the Saturn, which includes revised 2D visuals and smoother movement.



As with *Panorama Tou*, *Dragon Slayer*'s fantastic cover artwork had to make up for the fact that early PC visuals were quite simple.



Xanadu

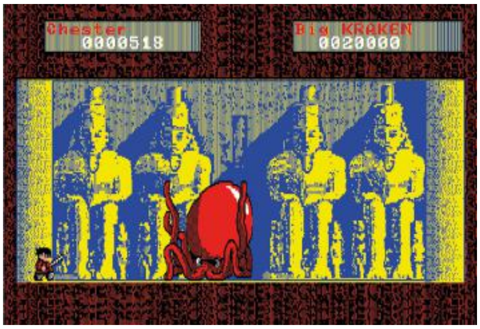
Developer: Falcom | Released: 1985 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, FM7, MSX, MSX2, SAT, WIN

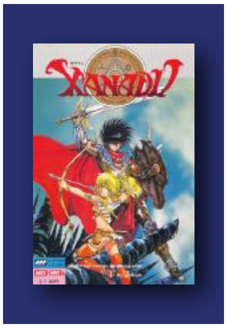
While Falcom was early to the RPG game with *Panorama Tou* and *Dragon Slayer*, it was really *Xanadu* that put it on the map. The game is a side-scrolling dungeon crawler, which begins in a town where you can spend gold to train up the various stats of your hero, before delving into the dungeons below. Each dungeon is several screens tall and several screens wide, and loops horizontally. The goal is to not only find the exit, but also gain enough strength and find enough equipment to defeat the boss, before moving onto the next dungeon, of which there are ten in total.

The levels are littered with enemies, and colliding with them will bring up a separate overhead battle arena where you engage in combat with multiple foes. As in *Dragon Slayer*, you run up and nudge them to attack, with damage distributed based on both characters' stats, though you can obtain projectile-based magic too. Mêlée and magic experience points are distributed separately, so you need to attack with both methods if you want a well rounded character. Your weapons also level up independently; you need to keep reusing them so they will gain in power. Finally, you need to keep track of your Karma stat. Every enemy is classified as "good" or "bad" (though even good enemies will attack you). If you kill too many good enemies, your Karma will go up, which will disallow you from entering certain areas, like the temples where you level up. The only way to lower your Karma is by drinking poisonous potions found during exploration, which also deplete a good chunk of HP.

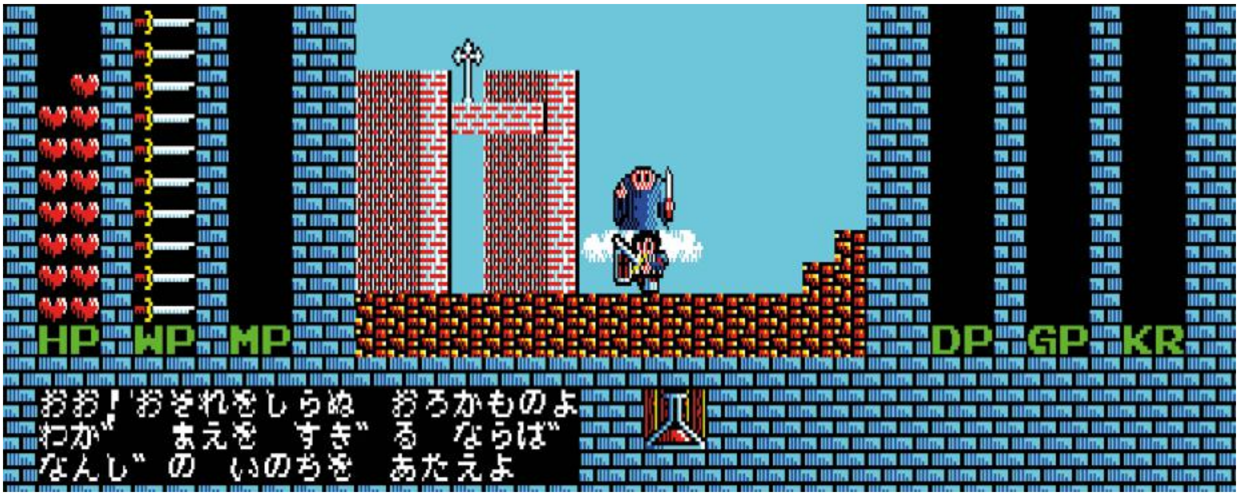
Xanadu is renowned for its brutal difficulty level, primarily because there are limited numbers of enemies and resources in each dungeon. You need to be careful in how you attack, use items, and upgrade your character, lest you get stuck in a position in which you're too under-powered to continue, and either need to reload an earlier save or start over from scratch. However, these elements ended up working in the game's favour, as computer magazines regularly featured strategy guides on how to conquer the mazes and optimise playthroughs. This acted as free advertising, and led to sales of over 500,000 units, which was tremendous for a computer game.

Falcom released an expansion called *Xanadu Scenario 2*, which adds several extra dungeons and assorted gimmicks. More importantly, it has an expanded soundtrack – the original release only had a main tune that was played occasionally, whereas in this release, most dungeons have their own themes. Much of this music was provided by Yuzo Koshiro, his first work for a video game. *Xanadu* received a few other remakes, including a set of PC releases called *Revival Xanadu*, as well as being featured on *Falcom Classics Vol. 1* for the Saturn. Amusingly, the shopkeeper graphics in the original release are mostly traced from the *Ultima III* manual, something that reportedly angered creator Richard Garriott when he found out.





***Xanadu* was popular enough that it received an anime OVA spinoff, albeit largely unconnected with the game itself. Nonetheless, the artwork for the anime was used for the cover of the MSX release.**



おお！'おそれをしらぬ　おろかものよ
わが　まえを　すぎる　ならば
なんじ　の　いのちを　あたえよ

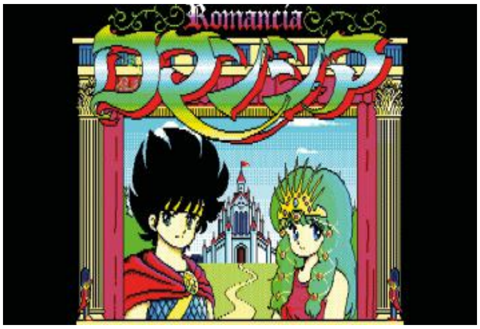
Romancia

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, MSX, X1, FC, WIN

Romancia bills itself on the packaging as "*Dragon Slayer Jr.*" Along with the rather simplified stat display, which shows HP as heart icons and weapon power as swords, this might suggest that it was meant for kids, or at least as an introductory level role-playing game. Don't fall for this, though! *Romancia* is just as hateful to the player as *Xanadu* and *Dragon Slayer* before it, though to be fair, it is much smaller and shorter – you're expected to complete it within a 30-minute limit.

Back in the '80s, there wasn't a really a strict divide between "adventure games" and "role-playing games". Indeed, *Romancia* leans a little bit more towards the "adventure" side, because there's actually not very much combat, with the emphasis more on fetch questing. As the visiting hero Prince Fan Freddy, you need to rescue the Princess Selina, who has been kidnapped by the neighbouring kingdom of Azoruba, and then find the Dragon Slayer sword to defeat the dragon Vaides, who has cursed the land.

The original version of the game was packaged with a manga that gave some guidance, but otherwise there are few hints about what you're actually supposed to be doing. One of the first major goals is to find the outfit that lets you enter heaven without actually dying. This is because most of the important items are granted by a group of wise men who live in the clouds. They don't grant these items to just anyone though, so the other major goal is to raise your Karma, one of the holdovers from *Xanadu*. This is done by performing good deeds, like ferrying medicine from the church to sick townspeople, and curing the town's poisoned water supply. Though there are enemies, killing most of them will actually lower your karma, since they're technically just cursed citizens. Your sword barely has any range though, and the lack of any invincibility period means that you can be killed pretty quickly.

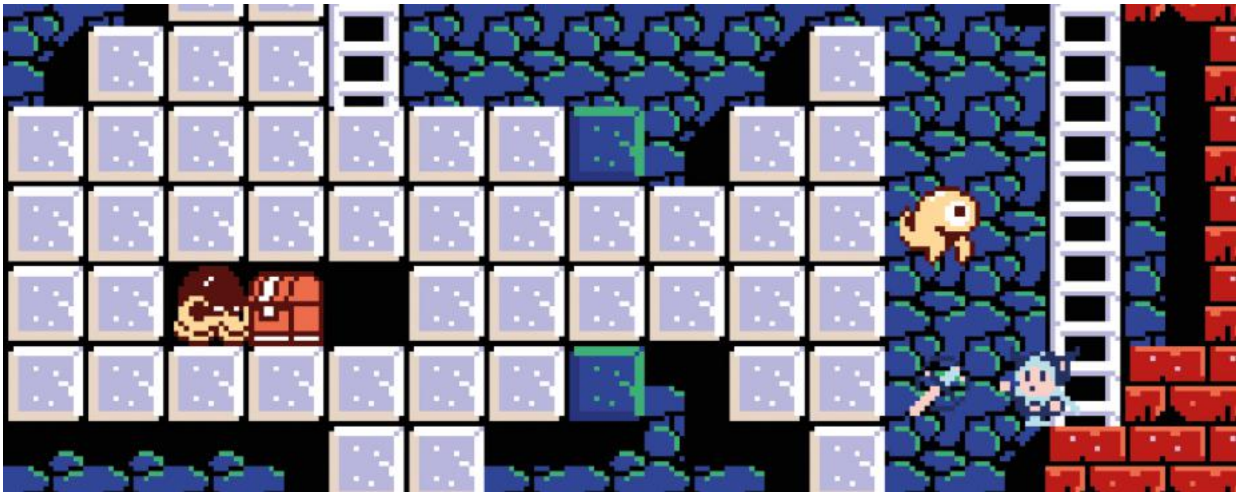


Romancia
ロマンシア
Falcom

***Romancia* utilised cutesy anime-style visuals rather than the Western fantasy-style artwork seen in most of their previous RPG releases.**

Romancia is the quintessential '80s "obscure for the sake of it" RPG, and while trying to outwit it is somewhat amusing, it is a difficult game to enjoy. Without the huge levels of its brethren, it is lacking in depth, and has too much fetch questing and not enough exploration. Still, it's well regarded for its technical prowess: in the disk versions, the game never stops to load after you begin, meaning the core is less than 64kb in size. Plus, the game was completely developed over the course of only about a month. Early on, Falcom may not have developed the most approachable games, but they were programming wizards. The character designs, by manga artist Kazuhiko Tsuzuki, are also fairly attractive, and the title screen theme by Yuzo Koshiro is solid too.

Compile developed a Famicom port, and a number of things were tweaked, including the world (expanded) and the combat sequences (new ones added). The timer is also gone, plus you can resurrect after dying – with a certain item.



Legacy of the Wizard

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): NES, MSX, MSX2

Through its early life, Falcom was primarily a PC developer, opting to license other companies to make conversions. *Dragon Slayer IV* was their first console-focused game, with the only other versions being released on MSX platforms. It's also the first in the series to receive an international release from Brøderbund, for which it was renamed *Legacy of the Wizard.* It features the Worzen Family (or Drasle Family in Japan, a combination of DRAgon SLAYer – it makes more sense in Japanese), whose house is right on top of a gigantic labyrinth. The goal, similar to that in previous games, is to find the four crowns and then the Dragon Slayer sword, then kill the dragon Keela.

There are five active members of the family, each with a different talent, mostly allowing them to enter certain parts of the dungeon. Xemn, the father, can equip gloves that allow him to move bricks; Meyna, the mother, has magical items that let her manipulate blocks; Lyll, the daughter, can jump very high; Pochi, the pet dragon, goes unharmed by normal enemy attacks (since he's technically a monster too); and Roas, the son, doesn't have his own section to explore, but is the only one who can wield the sword and defeat the final boss. Once you've chosen a family member, you can't switch until you return to your house on the surface, and you can only carry three items at once.

Legacy of the Wizard is very slightly easier than the previous games, primarily because there's no way to get stuck in a permanent, unwinnable situation. But it is just as vague and directionless, requiring that you experiment with each of the family members, using their talents to narrow down where they're supposed to be going. While it's structurally similar to other NES action adventures like *Castlevania II* or *The Goonies II,* it's much, much more demanding.

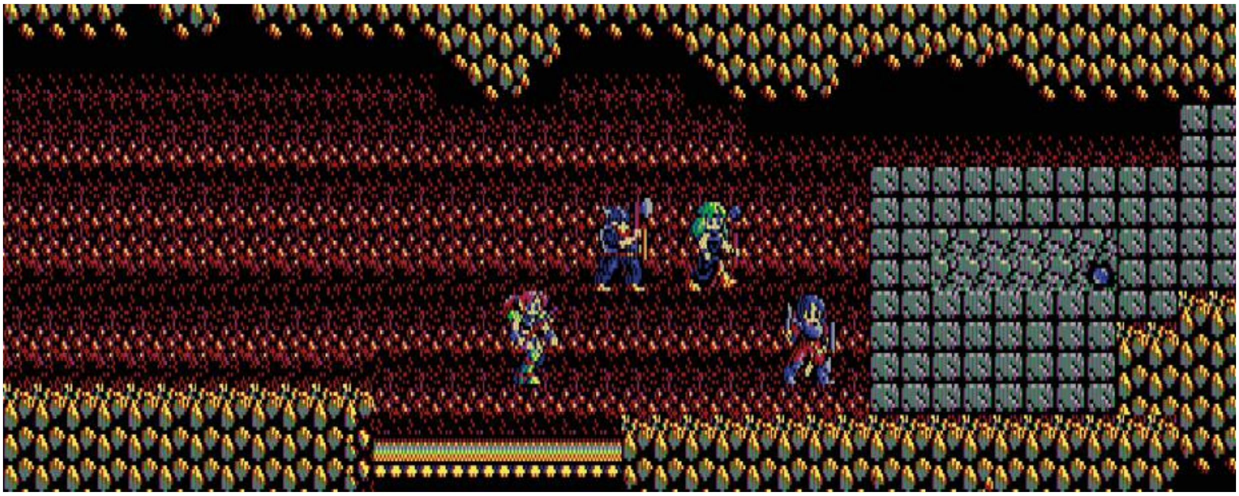
LIFE
MAGIC
KEY
GOLD
ITEM

Visually, it does look like the dungeons of *Xanadu,* complete with the square-sized sprites, but each area is much more visually distinct, plus there's a much greater focus on action and puzzle-solving. Rather than using a separate combat display, you just attack enemies directly on the main screen, with each character wielding projectiles, fueled by a magic meter. Enemies drop restoratives or money (and in some cases, poison), while regular inns and shops will help you keep your supplies replenished. Each section of the dungeon is long and unforgiving, especially the boss fights, and defeat will send you right back to your home base to start over again.

In spite of its high level of difficulty, *Legacy of the Wizard* is a fascinating game. There are few titles that match its uneasy sense of delving into a cavernous, seemingly incomprehensible maze, and the focus on action and exploration rather than hellish grinding or tedious fetch quests make this one superior to its predecessors. Plus the soundtrack, again by Yuzo Koshiro, is as excellent as always. The MSX versions are worth checking out too, for their slightly altered maps and some changes to the music.

Brøderbund
LEGACY OF THE WIZARD

Brøderbund brought *Legacy of the Wizard* west, the first *Dragon Slayer* game to an English-speaking audience.

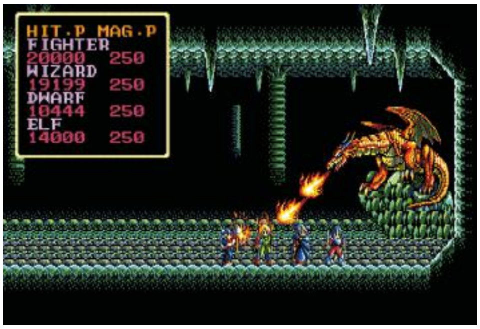


Sorcerian

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): MSX, PC88, PC98, X1, IBM, MD, PCECD, DC, WIN

Sorcerian is the fifth *Dragon Slayer* entry, though the series isn't actually mentioned anywhere in the title. It uses a scenario-based design and allows complete customisation of your party, recalling pen and paper role-playing games. You create characters of four types – Human Fighter, Human Wizard, Dwarf and Elf – then pick their genders and assign various stats. In town, you can purchase weapons and train in other skills, then you can pick from a variety of scenarios. There are 14 at the outset in the initial PC version, and they can be played in any order, though the 15th and final one, with the battle against the usual dragon, is unlocked towards the end. There's very little overarching story, though each level does have its own little mini-narrative, which are typically just told in the manual rather than the game itself. You can enter and exit scenarios at will, returning with any gold or experience you've obtained, plus you can play them over and over, even if you've beaten them. Characters age over time, and can take on full-time jobs when they're not adventuring, which also influences their stats and salary.

The stages are presented as side-scrolling action segments. The level design and graphics have advanced significantly from the squat character sprites of the previous *Dragon Slayer* games, but it does look a little bit silly, considering you control your entire party (of three or four characters) at once, with the first taking the lead, then the rest following in a line and shadowing their motions. There's no jumping animation either, so your characters just kinda float into the air and then fall. In effect, you're controlling a small squadron that looks like a railway train made out of people. Depending on their class and equipment, characters attack with either mêlée weapons or magic projectile spells.



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HIT.P MAG.P
FIGHTER
20000  250
WIZARD
19199  250
DWARF
10444  250
ELF
14000  250
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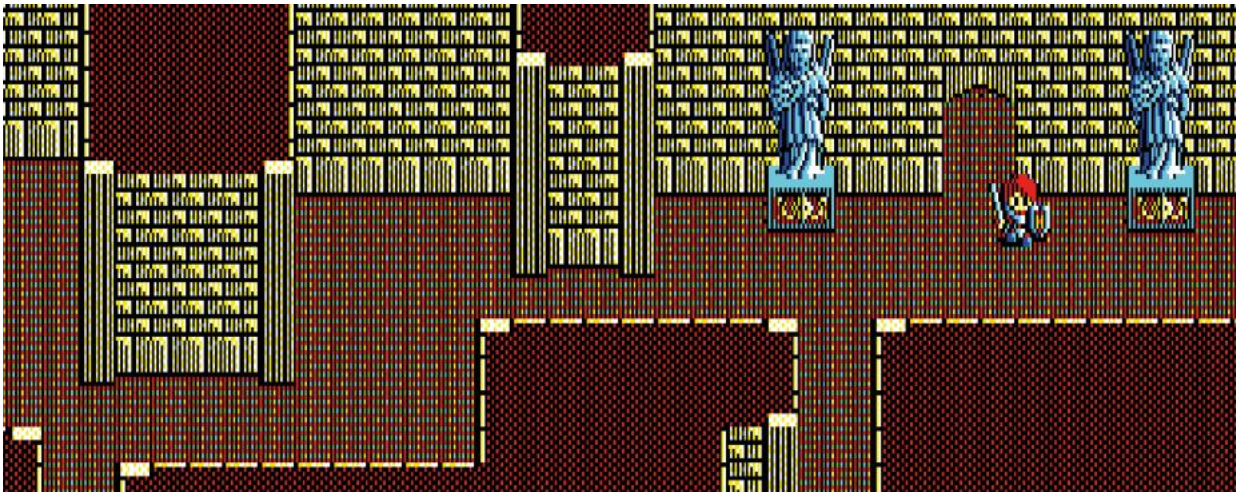
Falcom
SORCERIAN
SIERRA

Sierra brought *Sorcerian* out in North America. They also worked with Game Arts to release a few other Japanese PC games, like *Zeliard, Thexder,* and *Silpheed.*

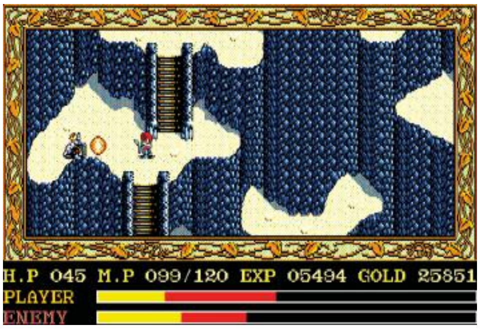
Sorcerian actually made it out of Japan, and was localised by Sierra for IBM PC computers. While it's nice to play it in English, some elements really didn't make the transition. The brilliant music, by Yuzo Koshiro (and others), really wasn't converted properly for Adlib FM sound cards, so it sounds quite bad. One of the draws was its modular design, which allowed third party developers to create and sell their own scenarios. Neither this feature nor any of these utilities ever made it outside of Japan. And it's a shame, because there are tons of extra level packs, some based on different times in history (e.g. *Sengoku Sorcerian, Pyramid Sorcerian, Gilgamesh Sorcerian*).

Sorcerian was popular enough in Japan that it was ported and remade for several different platforms, including the PC Engine, Mega Drive, and Dreamcast. All of these versions consist of some scenarios from the original PC game plus some exclusive levels. Falcom later made a sequel called *Sorcerian Forever* for Windows 95, complete with new SVGA visuals, though it only had five measly scenarios. *Sorcerian Original* uses this same updated style but features all of the stages from the original PC game.



Ys Book I & II

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): PC88, MSX2, FC, SMS, TGCD, WIN, PSP and more



Screenshots of the PC88 release of *Ys: The Vanished Omens* are shown on this page, but it was released on almost every platform of the time in Japan, both computers and consoles.

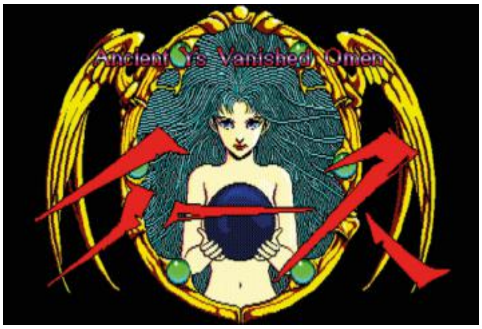
Falcom was known as one of the most prominent RPG developers in Japan throughout the ’80s, thanks to its *Dragon Slayer* line of games. But it was really its *Ys* (pronounced “ees”) series that brought the greatest success, and for quite a long time, was its flagship series. Unlike most other Falcom RPGs, it was not created by Yoshio Kiya, but rather a duo of programmers named Tomoyoshi Miyazaki and Masaya Hashimoto, who had previously worked on the *Asteka* series of adventure games. They developed the *Ys* series up to the third entry, after which they started their own development studio, Quintet.

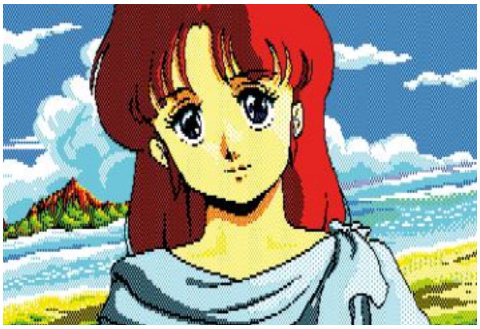
The hero of the *Ys* games is the wandering red-haired swordsman, Adol Christin. He’s a wandering adventurer who finds action, danger, and romance in every new journey, and operates as a silent protagonist in nearly all of the games. The first games in the series revolve around the ancient land of Ys, which is a mysterious, mythical city off the coast of Brittany, which purportedly vanished into the ocean. Here, instead, it actually broke itself away from the Earth and launched itself into the sky. Later games in the series move away from the legend of Ys, fully fleshing out the game world, which has rough analogues to areas in Western Europe and Northern Africa. He is accompanied by his partner Dogi, a hulking blue-haired fellow who will bust down any wall (literally) to rescue his pal.

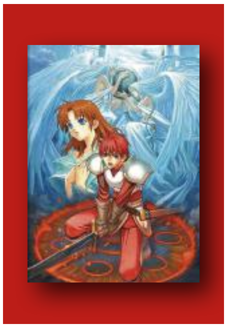
The first game in the series, *Ys: Ancient Ys Vanished* (alternatively: *The Vanished Omens*), has Adol searching for the lands of Ys. Here, he meets two mysterious women with blue hair, later revealed to be the twin goddesses Feena and Reah. The ending leads directly into the second game: *Ys II: The Final Chapter*, as Adol is engulfed in a pillar of light and sent to the floating land of Ys. Here, he connects with a village girl named Lilia, who ends up being kidnapped by the big evil, Darm.

The games are so closely connected that they tend to be packaged together. Plus, the first game is fairly compact – there are two towns, a small field, and three dungeons, the last of which is the sprawling Darm Tower, which consumes most of the playing time. The second game is quite a bit longer, lacking in an overworld, but sending Adol through caves, an ice world, a volcano, and then finally the Solomon Shrine for the climactic encounter.

Taking after *Hydlide*, *Ys* is an action RPG where you don’t actually swing your weapon, but instead ram into enemies. However, it’s been subtly tweaked in a number of ways. When attacking enemies, you can gain an advantage by running into them slightly off centre, rather than from the side. It is still, ultimately, a battle of numbers, and stronger enemies will still harm you regardless of how you approach them, but it is much smoother. Additionally, combatants that take damage will be knocked back slightly, allowing you to more easily retreat if you’re taking too much damage, or blow through foes if you’ve sufficiently over-powered them. It takes some getting used to, but it’s fun.


Ancient Ys Vanished Omen



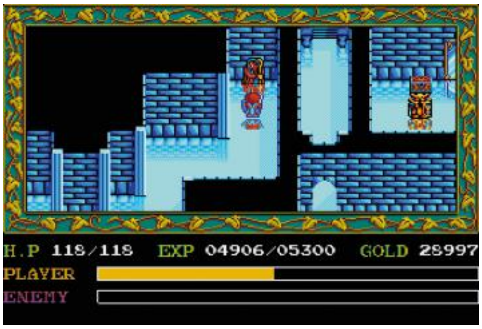


The stunning title screen artwork, as well as the image of Lilia from the prologue of *Ys II* (above left and far left) were burned into the brains of Japanese PC fans. Directly above is artwork from the *Ys Eternal* remake.

Ys is also known for its legendary soundtracks. These are two of the first games from Falcom to support the FM sound board on PC-8801mkII SR computers, and the result is just absolutely brilliant, mostly due to the intense action themes that pump blood into even the calmer moments of the game. Indeed, it's also very cinematic: every shopkeeper gets their own detailed portrait, and the opening sequence for *Ys II*, as Adol is whisked into the sky and first encounters Lilia, is legendary among Japanese RPG fans. The soundtrack was contributed by Mieko Ishikawa, Yuzo Koshiro, and Hideya Nagata.

The first two *Ys* games were ported to several Japanese computer and console platforms. Conversions of the first game for the IBM PC and Apple IIGS made their way to North America courtesy of Kyodai, though they were rather poor ports and were largely ignored. The SEGA Master System port of the first game was released internationally, though this also failed to make much of an impact, thanks to the unpopularity of the platform. It wasn't until the TurboGrafx-16 CD release that the series really obtained international fame. It was chosen by publisher Hudson to be the killer app for the platform, showing off not only the fancy cinematics, but the brand new soundtrack, arranged by Ryo Yonemitsu and played as an audio CD. It also had a stellar localisation, with professional English voice actors, a rarity for the time.

There were other ports through the years, though the most significant began with the *Eternal* series, which remade these two *Ys* games for Windows. They included brand new SVGA graphics, as well as smoother movement (including a faster walking speed for Adol, and diagonal movement) that made the bump system easier to handle. It also expanded the first game slightly, with a larger overworld, and a bigger script. This was used as the basis for *Ys I & II Chronicles* for the PSP, which was later ported back to Windows by Xseed and released internationally on Steam. These are probably the best versions, through the TG16 CD release is still ideal for those who love the look and sound of late '80s JRPGs.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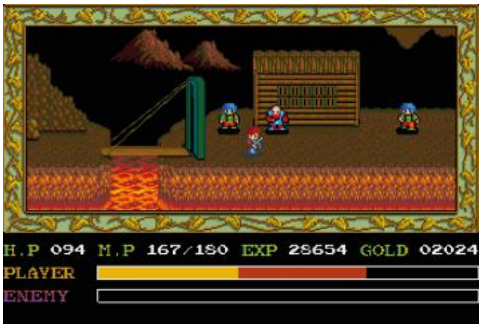
GOLD 28997
PLAYER
ENEMY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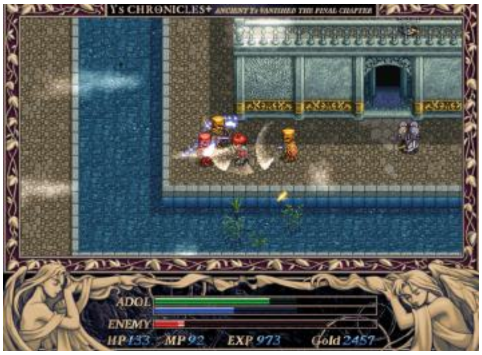
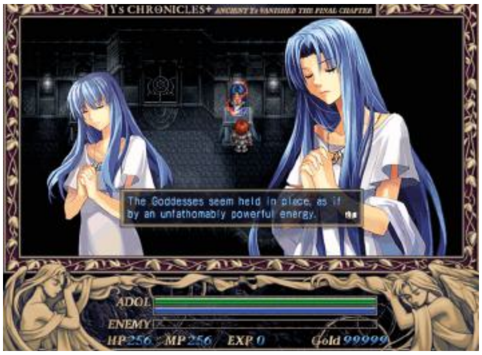
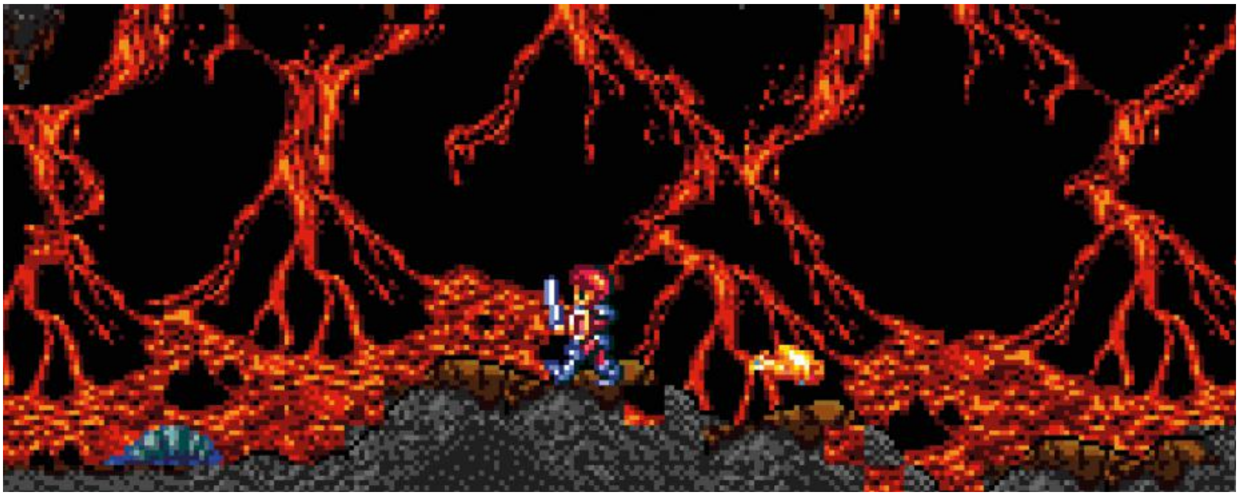

YS CHRONICLES+ ANCIENT Ys VANISHED THE FINAL CHAPTER
ADOL
ENEMY
HP133
MP92
EXP 973
Gold 2457


YS CHRONICLES+ ANCIENT Ys VANISHED THE FINAL CHAPTER
ADOL
ENEMY
HP256
MP256
EXP 0
Gold 99999

The Goddesses seem held in place, as if by an unfathomably powerful energy.

The TurboGrafx-16 CD version of *Ys Book I & II* (left, upper row) and the *Ys Chronicles* as remade for modern Windows platforms (lower row).



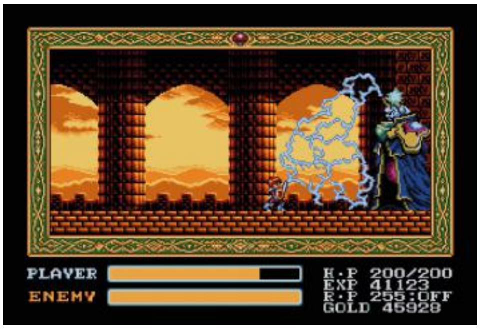
Ys III / Ys: The Oath in Felghana

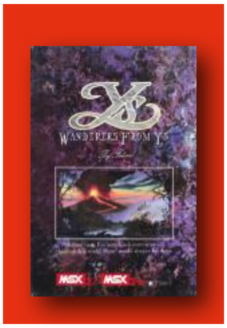
Developer: Falcom | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): PC88, MSX2, FC, GEN, TGCD, WIN, PSP and more

The third game in the *Ys* series didn't even start off as an actual *Ys* game, but as a separate Falcom side-scrolling action game. Somewhere along the line, the developers stuck an Adol sprite in there, and decided to turn the whole thing into a proper entry in the series. At first it was just deemed a spinoff, granted the name *Wanderers from Ys*, before later versions gave it the proper moniker, *Ys III*, on the packaging. The story takes place in Felghana, far away from the land of Ys, and the hometown of Adol's buddy Dogi. Foul things are afoot there, caused by a young man named Chester, who seeks artefacts to resurrect an ancient god.

Of course, since the perspective has changed from an overhead to a side view, the game plays completely differently, as Adol can now jump and swing his sword. Holding down the attack button will cause repeated sword swings from Adol, so you can still have the satisfaction of slicing through hordes of enemies, presuming you're at the necessary level. You can also stab upwards, or jump and point your sword downwards, à la *Zelda II*. The attack motions can make boss fights difficult though, as you often need to jump to reach their weak points. There is no magic system, and instead you can equip rings that temporarily increase various effects.

The action is clumsy, and it's quite dependent on levelling, though that aspect isn't really any different from the first two games. It is, however, extremely short, and linear. There's no real overworld, just a map screen where you can choose your next location. The stages are small and only have a few branches, so there's not much to explore, and there's only a single sub-quest. There's only one town, the central village of Redmont, and not many people to talk to. The game can be beaten in about three or four hours, and feels even more insubstantial than the first *Ys* game, which itself was pretty short, outside of the final dungeon.

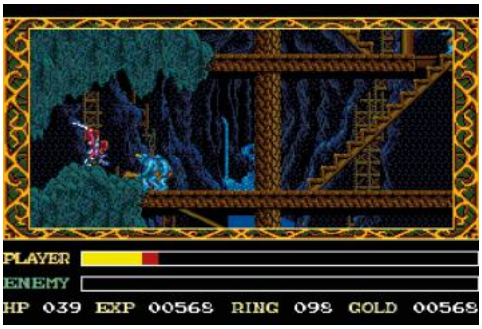


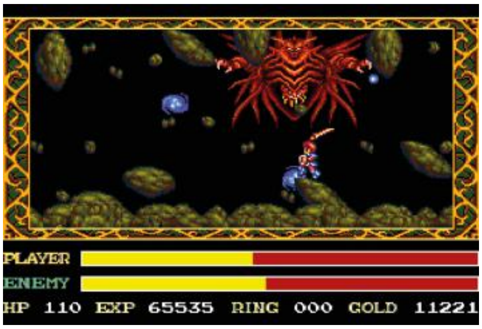


The game was a technical marvel when it was originally released on the NEC PC88/98 platforms, because it implemented parallax scrolling backgrounds, which was nothing short of a miracle for the hardware. This aspect is significantly less impressive on other platforms, particularly in the 16-bit console ports, where such effects were standard. The music, however, is easily the high point, with nearly every song being an instant classic.

For a long time, *Ys III* was probably the best-known game in the series, among English speakers, because all three 16-bit console ports were released in America, while the previous games had been relegated to less popular platforms. Since they all come from different publishers, though, the translations vary somewhat. The Genesis version is the most well-rounded, while the TurboGrafx-16 version has an amazing CD audio soundtrack, much like its predecessor. However, they skimped on the voice acting budget with this one, so the spoken dialogue is terrible.

While very different from its predecessors, the third *Ys* game maintains the same sense of style, and awesome music, as the first two games.





Unlike the mainline *Ys* games of the time, *Ys III* allows Adol to actually swing his sword instead of just bumping into bad guys. Hold down the button for rapid-fire swings, and Adol chops through baddies like a human buzzsaw.

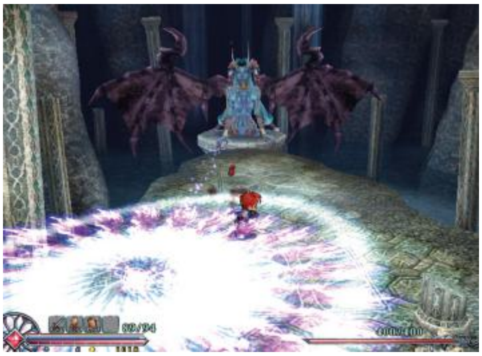
The SNES version is ugly and glitchy, and generally not worth playing. The series effectively disappeared in North America for a long time after this game, and frankly, this isn't it at its best.

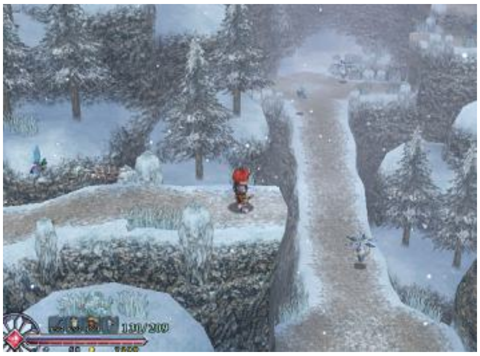
Ys III was viewed as the black sheep of the series for quite a while. However, it was not forgotten, and in 2005, Taito licensed the *Ys* games for a series of PlayStation 2 remakes. *Ys III* for the PS2 remains faithful in many ways, though it has brand new, more detailed 2D sprites. However, the action is arguably even more awkward than before, and it removes the scrolling in favour of flipscreens. Very little else has changed, and it all feels pointless.

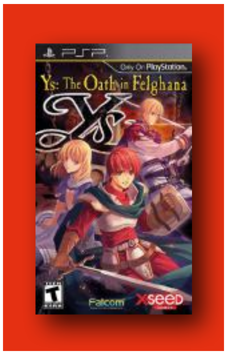
Around the same time, though, Falcom was planning its own remake, called *Ys: The Oath in Felghana*, initially released on Windows platforms in 2005. This is a much more radical reimagining, using the same engine as *Ys VI: The Ark of Napishtim*. It plays basically identically, with an overhead perspective consisting of 2D sprites and 3D backgrounds (and boss fights). The action now feels more authentically *Ys*, plus it's rather more polished than *Ys VI*.

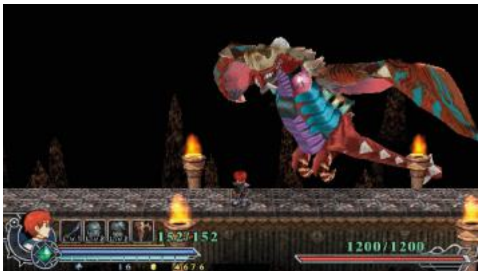
The story itself hasn't really changed from that in the original release of *Ys III*, but the dialogue has been greatly expanded, adding many more characters to the town, as well as fleshing out some characters and subplots. The map screen has been replaced with a small field area from which you can travel to the next stage, and each area has been drastically reworked and expanded. It makes the game feel much fuller, but at the same time, it doesn't wear out its welcome, as it can be completed in eight to ten hours. All of the music has been rearranged, often with live guitars, and it all sounds fantastic. In other words, this little remake completely redeems *Ys III*.

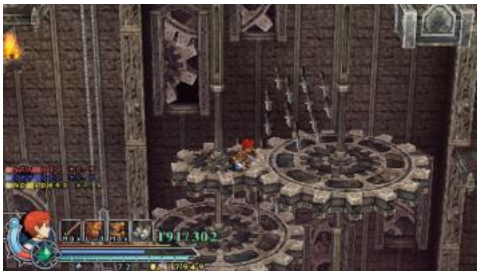
After the initial Windows release, a PSP version was developed and released worldwide by Xseed. Though running at a lower resolution, this version has some improvements, including some difficulty tweaks, full voice acting, and the ability to choose soundtracks from the PC88 and X68000 versions (though sadly not the TurboGrafx-CD music) in addition to the version arranged for this game. The original Windows version was also translated for English-speaking markets.



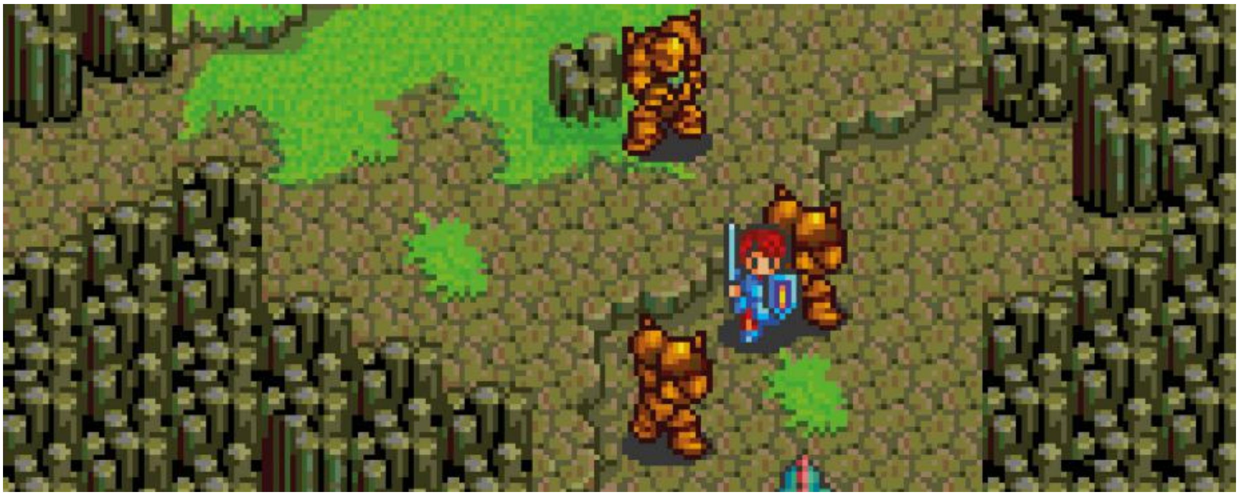








***The Oath in Felghana* is a hugely improved remake that elevates this entry from "kinda bad but fun" to "legitimately one of the best action RPGs of all time".**



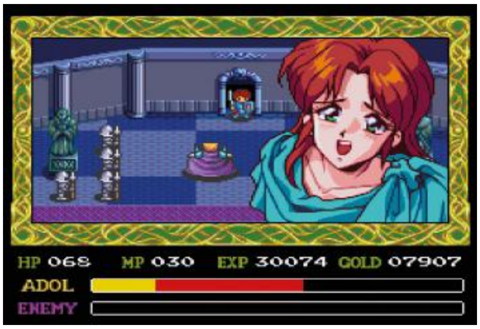
Ys IV / Ys: Memories of Celceta

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): PCECD, SFC, PS2, PSV, WIN, PS4

Ys IV has a pretty confusing release history, in that there are technically four different variations of it, all from different developers, for different platforms. There's the PC Engine CD version, by Hudson (*Dawn of Ys*), the Super Famicom version by Tonkin House (*Mask of the Sun*), a PlayStation 2 remake from Taito (*Mask of the Sun: A New Theory*), and finally, another remake from Falcom themselves for the Vita (*Memories of Celceta*). They are all drastically different games, though they do have some commonalities.

They all take place in Celceta, a land thick with forests, and the home of a special healing plant, which is found in the other *Ys* games. The storyline delves into the history of the Eldeen, a winged people from another age, revealed as the race of Feena and Reah from the earlier *Ys* games. Many town names are the same, and there's always a town that exists in the trees. Between the versions, the core cast members are mostly the same, though occasionally they are placed in different roles. Recurring characters include Karna, a warrior woman; Eldeel, one of the Eldeen; and Leeza, Eldeel's caretaker. There's also a trio of miscreants who will accost Adol throughout the journey, named Gadis, Bami, and Gruda.

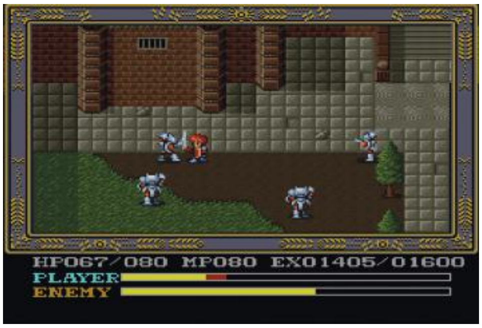
The game also introduces the Romun Empire, an army who are occasionally a thorn in Adol's side. And all the versions revolve around two artefacts known as the Mask of the Sun and the Mask of the Moon. The soundtracks also use much of the same music, though the tracks are used in different areas, and there are some songs unique to each game. It's an expansive soundtrack, too – the *Perfect Collection* album version spans three CDs.

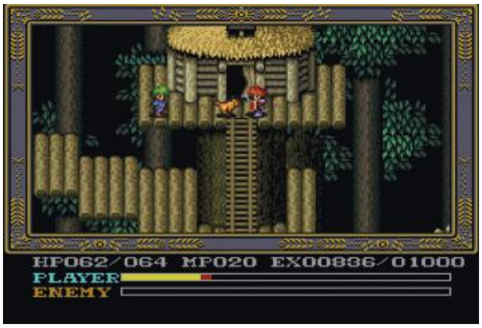


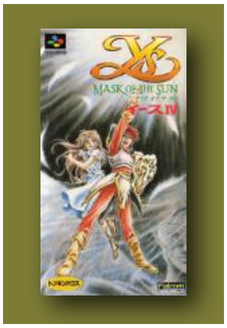
Dawn of Ys for the PC Engine Super CD doesn't differ too drastically from the system's ports of *Ys Book I & II*. However, the fighting is much smoother, partially because Adol can finally move diagonally. The character designs are also improved and cutscenes appear with more frequency. Whenever a character talks, there's a gigantic portrait with lip-synched speech, and the history of Celceta is fleshed out with elaborate full screen pictures, which is probably why *Ys IV* requires the Super CD-ROM card rather than the standard system card of its predecessors. The visual improvement is welcome, because the plot is much more elaborate in this game than any of its forebears. It's also a much longer game, requiring more playtime than the first two games put together.

The Super Famicom version, subtitled *Mask of the Sun*, is something of a pale imitation – it lacks most of the visual enhancements and cutscenes. Not only does it look and feel poor in comparison with other ports, but it feels stark even compared to other Super Famicom RPGs of the time. The action feels rougher, as Adol can only move in four cardinal directions. The music

It may not be the canon version of the story, but the PC Engine CD version of *Ys IV* is easily the best of the initial versions, especially with character designs, styled at the peak of '90s anime.







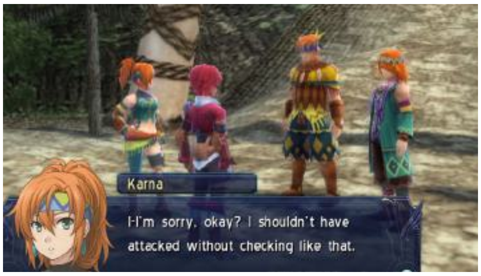
The Super Famicom version of *Ys IV*: *Mask of the Sun*, is nowhere near as high-quality as the PC Engine CD release.

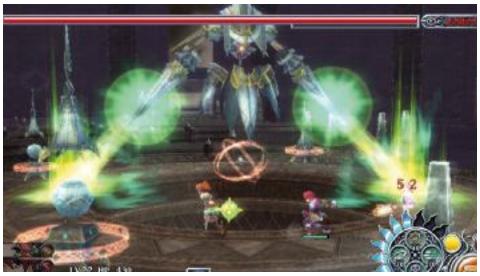
sounds chintzy, and key things like shopkeeper portraits are missing. Many of these issues were due to the fact that it was developed for a cartridge, which had far less capacity than the CD-ROM, but it still feels hastily made.

Much later down the line, in 2005, Taito began porting and publishing remakes of older *Ys* games for the PlayStation 2. While their *Ys IV* version was based on *Mask of the Sun*, it took some substantial liberties with the plotline, and the gameplay systems are also completely different. It plays a little more like *Ys VI*, using 2D sprites on 3D backgrounds, but it looks and feels cheap and clumsy.

Finally, in 2012, Falcom developed its own remake of *Ys IV* for the PS Vita. Subtitled *Memories of Celceta* for the English release, it reworks the storyline even more than the others, adding a number of extra characters and basing the gameplay systems on those of *Ys Seven*. In addition to Adol, secondary characters like Duren and Karna can now fight alongside you, each offering different types of attack. It's a much larger game too, challenging you to map the expansive forest of Celceta, while hunting for fragments of Adol's lost memory. It's an excellent game, though it's missing much of the music from the earlier titles. Plus it feels like a PSP port, as the visuals are quite muddy, though this was fixed in later Windows and PlayStation 4 releases.

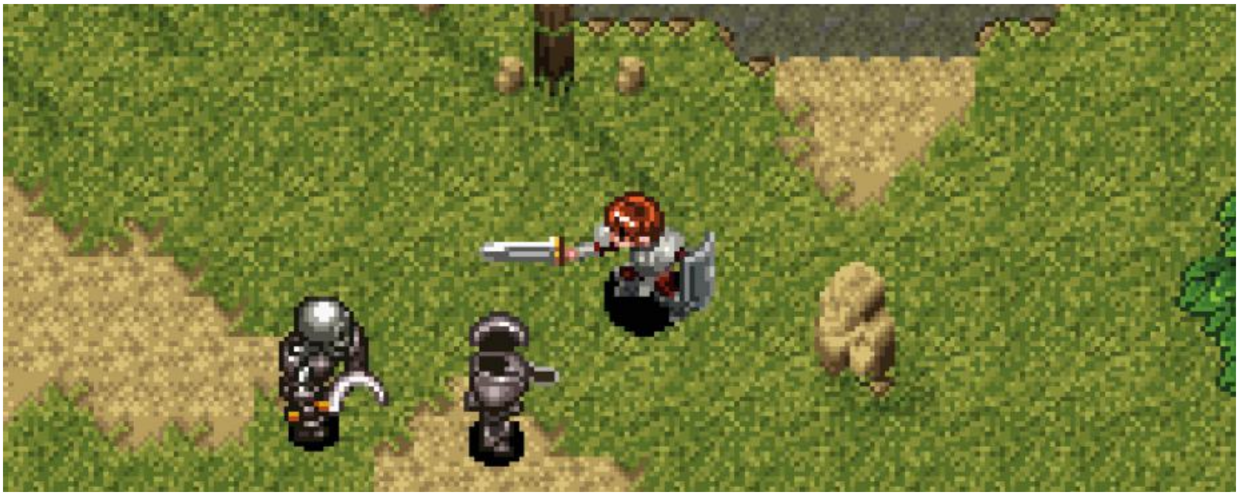
So how did all of these wildly disparate versions come about? It began with Hudson, which published the PC Engine/TurboGrafx-16 ports of *Ys I-III*. These titles were very successful, so Hudson approached Falcom about creating a sequel for its console. Unfortunately, a substantial number of staff had quit Falcom at this time (including Tomoyoshi Miyazaki and Masaya Hashimoto, the series' original creators), largely due to payment disputes, so the company lacked the resources to develop it. Unable even to provide a full script, they created a loose framework for a scenario and supplied the music, which Hudson used to create the PCE game. Since Falcom had a basic game design document, they also pitched it to Tonkin House, developer of the SNES port of *Ys III*, who used it to create their own *Ys IV*. The later remakes were just the result of different development teams trying their own takes on the material. Previously, *Mask of the Sun* (for the SFC) was considered the "true" version of the story, since it stayed the closest to Falcom's original plan while the PC Engine wildly deviated from it, but given that *Memories of Celceta* was developed by Falcom, it is now considered the canon rendition of the *Ys IV* storyline.


Karna
I-I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have attacked without checking like that.



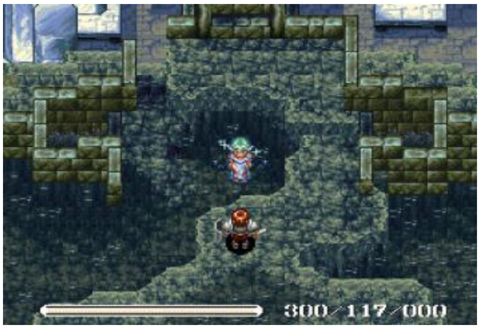
Initially released for the Vita, *Memories of Celceta* is the fourth version of *Ys IV*, and the first to have been developed in-house by Falcom.

PS VITA
Only On PlayStation
Ys
CELCETA
Falcom



Ys V: Ushinawareta Suna no Miyako Kefin

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC, PS2



Ys III was considered the black sheep of the series for a short while ... until this one was released.

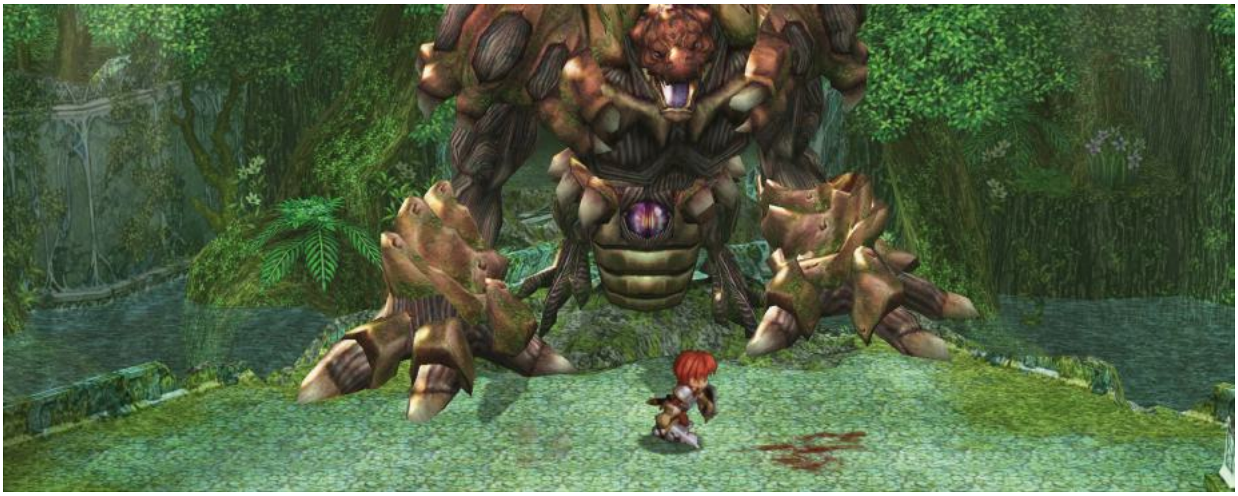
Ys V: Ushinawareta Suna no Miyako Kefin ("Lost Kefin, Kingdom of Sand") begins as Adol lands in the region of Xandria, in the realm of Afroca (the *Ys* parallel to Africa). He is contracted by a wealthy merchant named Dorman to hunt for some crystals, which are said to unlock the secrets of Kefin, a city that disappeared centuries ago. The desert has mysteriously been spreading, displacing some of the towns in the area, and Kefin supposedly holds the key to stopping it. It's a pretty standard story, though there are some memorable characters, like Tera, a young girl who's part of a gang of outlaws, and Stoker, a ghost who longs for his fiancée, who has been encased in ice for centuries.

While the PCE and SFC versions of *Ys IV* were handled by outside developers, *Ys V* was created by Falcom, but it feels remarkably different from any of the previous titles. Though it keeps the overhead perspective, the bump system is gone, and Adol attacks by swinging a sword at the push of a button. He can jump too, and there's some light platforming action. However, movement is slow and it just doesn't feel satisfying. There's a magic-like system that lets you shoot projectiles, though here it's called alchemy, and you can use elemental crystals to craft your own spells.

Aesthetically, *Ys V* is worlds apart from any of the previous games, with character designs and a muted colour palette that scream "stereotypical Super Famicom RPG". Cutscenes are scarce, and things like close-up portraits of characters and shopkeepers are missing. The soundtrack has an orchestral feel, and while it's really very good, it's also nothing like any of the previous (or subsequent) *Ys* games.

The game also feels very obviously incomplete. In its 2003 book *Ys Complete Works,* Falcom published the original design documents, which illustrated just how much had been cut from the final game. Dogi, for example, is completely missing, and considering the locale, you spend very little time in an actual desert. It's also on the short side, with a full adventure taking maybe five or six hours. The initial release was not only buggy, but was also deemed too easy by the audience, so just a few months after publication, a revised version called *Ys V Expert* was released, which, among assorted tweaks, includes an extra dungeon.

As with the two previous games, *Ys V* received a remake for the PlayStation 2 courtesy of Taito. The visual style is closer to their release of *Ys IV*, and it also reintegrates some of the elements removed from the SFC release, including making Dogi a part of the story again. However, the controls remain ropey, and whole thing still feels very low budget. While Falcom did remake *Ys III* and *IV* (as *The Oath in Felghana* and *Memories of Celceta*), they have yet to revisit Adol's adventures in Kefin. Neither the SFC nor the PS2 release was localised, making this the only story in the series unreleased in English.



Ys VI: The Ark of Napishtim

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): WIN, PS2, PSP

Falcom withdrew from console development after *Ys V*, and spent the next several years working on Windows ports and remakes of their older titles. Finally, in 2003, they resurrected the series, with *Ys VI: The Ark of Napishtim* for Windows.

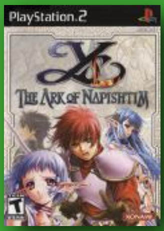
The game begins with Adol getting shipwrecked in the Canaan Vortex, the *Ys* analogue of the Bermuda Triangle. Part of this tropical area is inhabited by a native elvish tribe called the Rehda. The other side of the island is a colony of humans, all of whom, like Adol, have been captured by the vortex. Tensions are high between the two villages, because the humans insist on destroying Rehda ruins in order to build their town. Then the Romun army invades, seeking another mythical artefact: the eponymous Ark of Napishtim, which has the power to control the weather. The story has plenty of callbacks to earlier titles, including some returning characters, like Tera, the bandit girl from *Ys V*.

The environments are now 3D, though the camera is fixed, while most characters are 2D. The mechanics are similar to *Ys V* but more refined. Adol can still jump and swing his sword with a button press, but the controls are smoother, and the fast-paced action is much closer to that in the older *Ys* titles. Boss battles are also significantly more impressive, with gigantic hulking beasts, rendered in polygons, exemplifying the arcade-style action that sets the series apart from other action RPGs. And the music maintains the glorious synth rock style of the 16-bit days.

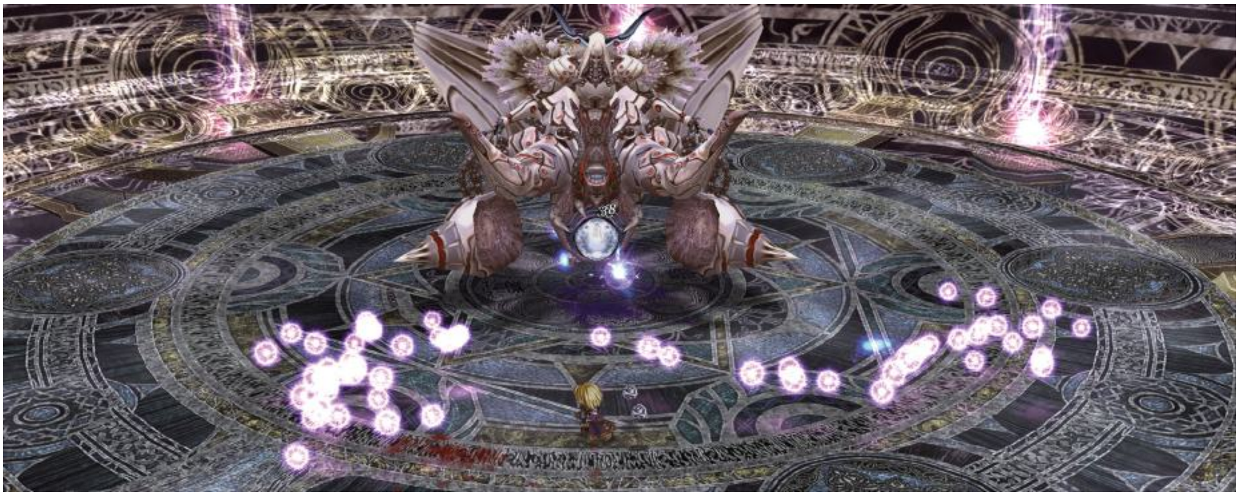
Some minor elements have deviated from the formula. You can no longer save anywhere, instead being required to visit specific monuments to record progress. You can't heal by standing still either, although visiting the monuments will max out your health. To make up for this, enemies drop a variety of curatives. These can even be used in boss battles, although you can only carry so many at once.

Design-wise, the game is pretty rough around the edges. Hacking and slashing at foes is generally fun, but certain enemies have attack frames that are difficult to discern, and the camera perspective can make some boss fights confusing. There's a dash-jump manoeuvre that lets you leap farther, but the timing to pull it off is unforgiving. The worst part of the game is that you spend an inordinate amount of time navigating the Limewater Cave, an expansive maze that is mostly clad in darkness, and filled with enemies that do tremendous damage, even when you're properly levelled up. Overall, it's a fine revival, but the later games are substantial improvements.

Konami brought the series to the PlayStation 2 and PlayStation Portable internationally, adding some badly dubbed voice acting. Neither are ideal – the PS2 version replaces the 2D sprites with simple 3D models, while the PSP port has substantial technical issues. XSeed brought out the Windows version in English in 2015.

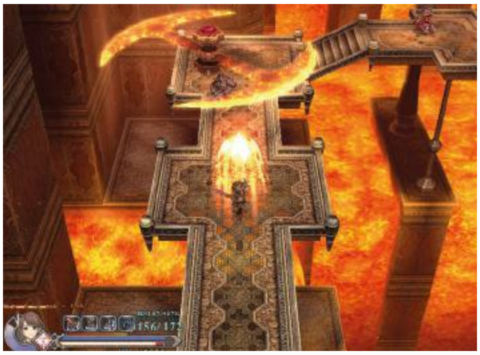


***Ys VI* was a soft reboot of the series, and while it has some roughness, it works pretty well, and set down the template for succeeding entries.**



Ys Origin

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): WIN, PS4, PSV, XB1, NSW



As a prequel to the series, *Ys Origin* includes a ton of references to the first two *Ys* games, though it stands pretty well on its own, too.

After *Ys VI* and *Ys: The Oath in Felghana*, Falcom went back into the series' history with this prequel. In fact, it takes place 700 years prior to the first *Ys* game, not long after the kingdom of Ys was launched into the sky in order to save it from demon attack. The two goddesses of *Ys*, Feena and Reah, have mysteriously disappeared from their home in the Solomon Shrine. A search party, consisting of members of the Holy Knights of Ys, is sent to the site to discover what has become of them. What they find is a broken, desolate land, barely fit for human life. Their search leads them to a gigantic spire, where invading forces want to use the power of the goddesses for their own nefarious ends.

The entire game takes place in that gigantic spire, which is also known as Darm Tower, the final dungeon in the first *Ys* game. At the outset, there are two playable characters – Yunica Tovah, a mêlée fighter who is controlled similarly to Adol from the previous two games, and Hugo Fact, a powerful magician with projectile based spells, who gives the game a run-and-gun feel. A third, unlockable character, initially just referred to as The Claw, is another mêlée-focused character with some cool dashing abilities.

Each character plays uniquely, and has their own storyline, complete with different supporting cast members, who pop up for important story scenes. However, the climb through the tower is mostly the same for all three, as you fight through a section flooded with water, one mired in lava, and another drowning in sand. The trek is mostly linear, and the game feels cramped without some kind of hub area, though you do often need to jump back and forth between floors. And while the hack-and-slash combat is as much fun as ever, the game expects you to play through it multiple times to unlock The Claw, who's not only the most fun character, but also has the best storyline, since he's technically something of a villain. It's a short game, but there's not really sufficient difference between their journeys to justify the multiple playthroughs.

The story itself, as usual for *Ys* games, is just okay, but there's plenty of fan service for long-time *Ys* aficionados. Aside from the main characters mostly being related to the priests of old (whose books you had to hunt for at the beginning of *Ys II*), it sees the return of Feena and Reah, and the plot centres on an evil artefact called the Black Pearl. You'll meet up with little Roos, the monsters you could transform into via magic, and find a Mask of Eyes to hunt for hidden passages as in the first *Ys*. Most of the bosses are based on those in battles from the first two games as well. It's not essential to have played these games to understand the story, but it certainly enriches it. Overall, in spite of its repetitive structure, it's still a damn solid *Ys* title. Originating on the PC, it was ported to the Vita, as well as other consoles, making it more available than some other entries.

Ys Seven

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): PSP, WIN

Damage
62
30

PSP
Ys Seven
Falcom
seed

After taking a detour in remake/prequel territory with *The Oath in Felghana* and *Ys Origin*, Falcom finally returned to the ongoing story of Adol with *Ys Seven* in 2009, initially released for the PSP. It begins at sea, as our heroes land in the country of Altago, which is the in-game equivalent of Carthage. The land is being ravaged by disease, earthquakes, and even gigantic monsters known as Titanos, and Adol is the one chosen to explore the land and discover the five dragons that can set things right. Things go amiss somewhere along the line, as Adol and company end up on the wrong side of the law, having to fight against those whom they are trying to save.

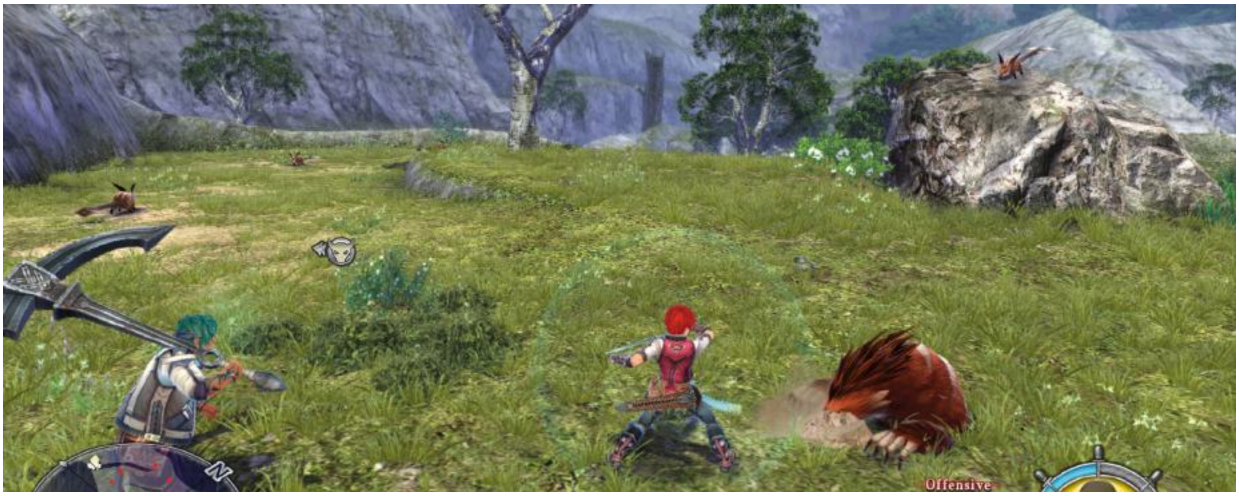
Ys Origin introduced multiple playable characters, but *Ys Seven* goes several steps further by making several characters active companions on Adol's quest. This is the first game (outside of the Japan-only mobile games) where one can actually play as Dogi, which long-time fans should enjoy. Other playable characters include Geis, a mercenary from *Ys VI*; Aisha, a runaway princess, and her bodyguard Sigroon; Elk, a young boy from a forest village; Mustafa and Cruxie, a brother and sister from the desert; and Mishera, a blind priestess and magician. Three characters fight together, as you can switch between them, while the AI controls the others. Thankfully, unlike, say, those in *Secret of Mana*, they are invincible, so you don't need to babysit them. Characters have different weapon types, effective against different kinds of enemies, as well as their own unique attack skills, activated by holding the shoulder button.

The characters are now polygonal as opposed to sprites, and they look significantly better than the models used in the PS2 version of *Ys VI*. The basic fighting system feels quite similar to that in the previous trilogy, although the jump button has been replaced with a dash roll. This gives you extra manoeuvrability in combat, but it also means that the levels feel much flatter in the absence of all the platforming elements. There's also a block button, as well as Flash Guard manoeuvre, executed by hitting R in the middle of a block – if you time it right, you get a few extra perks.

The scope of the game has also been drastically expanded. The previous games were fairly compact compared to typical JRPGs, with minimal equipment and journeys that lasted maybe ten hours. *Ys Seven* has dozens of different weapons, numerous skills, and a substantially longer quest, lasting 20 hours or more. It's much more loot-based, as enemies will drop various knick-knacks, which can either be sold or used to forge new equipment. As a counterpoint, though, it's not as demanding when it comes to arcade-style action, and is thus much easier than the previous *Ys* games.

However, even though it's longer, the story just isn't very interesting – after all, how many other RPGs feature elemental dragons? Plus the latter half of the game drags, with quite a bit of backtracking and revisiting old areas. The sequels improve on things, but the action is still fun and punchy, and the music is excellent as always.

***Ys Seven* shows the influence of *Legend of Heroes: Trails of the Sky*, which at this point was surpassing *Ys* in popularity.**

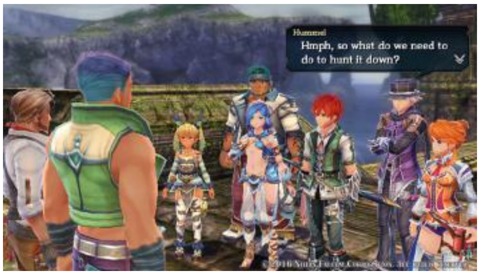


Ys VIII: Lacrimosa of Dana

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2017 | Platform(s): PSV, PS4, WIN, NSW

After *Ys Seven*, the series diverted into another remake of *Ys IV* (called *Memories of Celceta*) before returning to the main plot with the eighth entry, *Lacrimosa of Dana*. Set between *Ys V* and *Ys VI*, Adol has gotten himself shipwrecked again! Except this time, it's on a deserted island called Seiren, complete with ancient ruins, and inhabited by a whole lot of monsters. The main goals are to gather up all of the other stranded folks from the shipwreck, build a new boat, and kill the monsters that patrol the island and would otherwise prevent them from escaping. In the meantime, the game takes you several centuries back into the past, when the island was still inhabited by people, and focuses on a girl named Dana. She is eventually transported to the present day to journey with Adol and gang. Her fate will turn out to be go far beyond merely helping the group of castaways.

Ys VIII starts up in earnest with the sunny guitars of the "Sunshine Coastline" theme, one of the most stellar themes in a series already filled with outstanding soundtracks. Gameplay-wise, it's pretty similar to *Memories of Celceta*, though the camera switches to a behind-the-back perspective, and it re-introduces the jump button, which in turn makes for more interesting environments than in the previous two games. The combat feels a bit weightier but is as satisfying as always. As with the forest of Celceta, there's a significant focus on mapping the island of Seiren. You also build a community of shipwreck survivors, who form a base and perform various tasks, including crafting and enhancing equipment, tailoring new outfits, and creating medicines. When you find enough people, they can help you move obstacles and allow you to enter new parts of the island. Overall, it's somewhat like a smaller version of the castle from the *Suikoden* games. Since there aren't any other people on the island, currency is worthless, and instead you barter using the many natural goods found around the island. Including Adol, there are six playable characters, including the stuffy scholar Laxia, the boisterous fisherman Sahad, the mysterious gun-wielder Hummel, and the cutesy girl Ricotta.

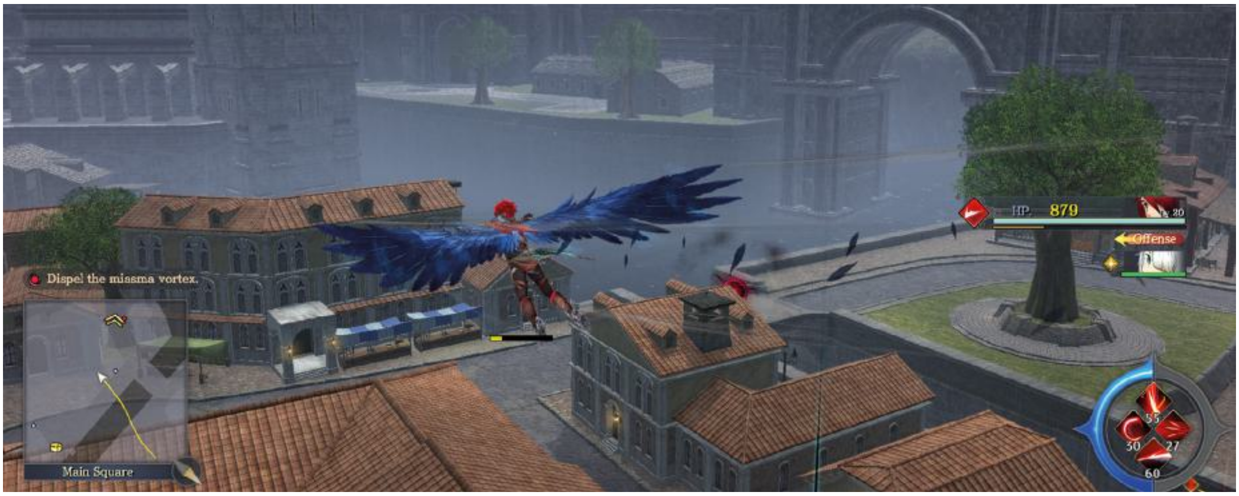

Hummel
Hmph, so what do we need to do to hunt it down?

PS VITA
Ys VIII Lacrimosa of Dana

Taking a page from Falcom's *Trails* series, you can ingratiate yourself with the other characters by running sub-quests for them, or by finding and giving gifts. Once you've done all you can, there's an extra scene that reveals that character's backstory or enhances their relationship with Adol. Some of these characters are stock anime tropes, but there are some more unusual folks, like the elderly swordswoman Silvia.

As a tropical island, Seiren is filled with beaches and ocean views, but the environments do grow repetitive, as they're mostly just variations on mountains, swamps, and caves, with some ruins and a ghost ship tossed in. The game is quite a bit longer than *Seven* or *Celceta*, and the story takes a while to go anywhere, since you spend about half the game hunting for people. And it was developed as a Vita game, so even on stronger platforms, the visuals are a little low tech. Still, these issues aside, this is the height of this particular incarnation of the *Ys* series.

***Ys VIII* takes place entirely on a tropical island forgotten by time, making it feel simultaneously more focused and more restrictive.**



Ys IX: Monstrum Nox

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2019 | Platform(s): PS4, WIN, NSW

Ys VIII was a decent game, but from an overall story standpoint, it was spinning its wheels. Following up on *Ys VIII*, many Falcom fans half-expected the company to remake *Ys V*, especially considering the large number of references to that game contained within Adol's adventures on Seiren Island. Instead, the company opted to finally push the series' story forward with *Ys IX: Monstrum Nox*, the first such step in a decade. *Ys IX* takes place in the Romun-occupied city of Balduq – a settlement well-known for its gigantic, towering central prison. Thanks in no small part to his prior interactions with the Romun Empire, Adol finds himself imprisoned within its walls – and thrust into the mystery surrounding the prison and its history. Although he does manage to escape before too long, but this act entangles him in an unseen conflict surrounding the town, involving the Monstrum Curse, which enables select individuals to participate in the otherworldly Grimwald Nox.

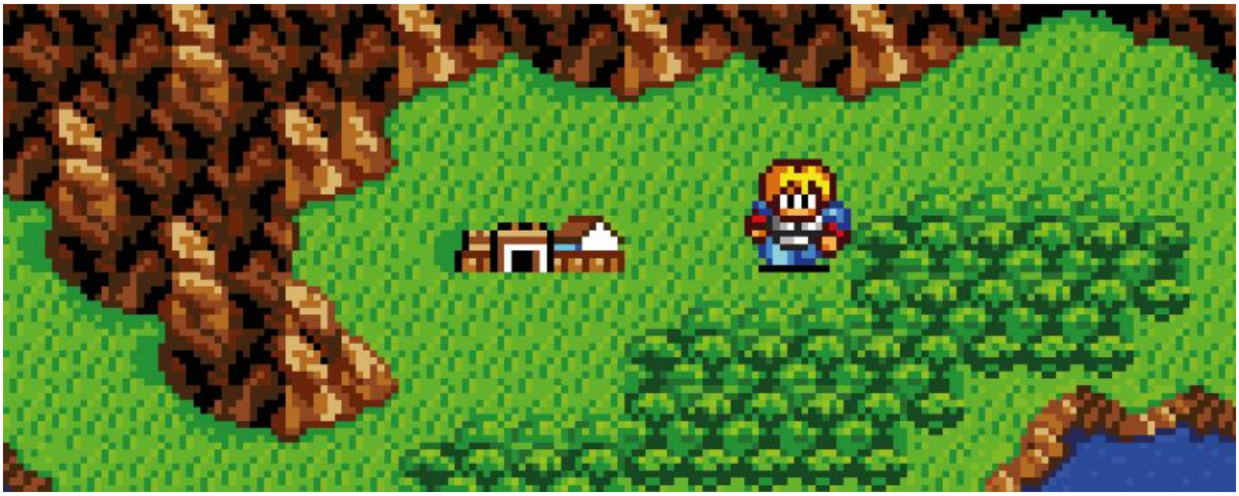
The vast majority of *Ys IX* takes place within the city of Balduq proper, if not in or around the imposing prison at the centre of it all. For the most part, the gameplay is identical to *Ys VIII*'s with only a few additions, mostly centred around Monstrum Gifts – abilities that Cursed members of Adol's party can access. These can be anything from Heaven's Run – which offers you the ability to run up walls and other vertical surfaces – to the ability to glide, break down certain walls, and more. With a wide-open city to explore, *Ys IX* takes *Ys VIII*'s exploration and condenses it more or less into a single map, with much less emphasis on specific fields, and much more on the one central environment with its various unique districts.

My guess says they want it on hand
as a stronghold in case of a revolt.

_Ys IX_ is a bit darker than its predecessor – hardly surprising given the contrast between a prison city and a sunny island.

Adol has now dyed his signature red hair to blue to keep undercover, while many of his companions are fellow fugitives called Monstrums, who have various unique capabilities. Over the course of the game, you'll also uncover their true identities. Much as in *Ys VIII*, players have access to a central hub through which they can upgrade facilities and recruit new allies – Dandelion, a pub just outside of the central city, hosted within an alley away from prying eyes. It isn't as memorable as Castaway Village in *Ys VIII*, however – like many of the gameplay systems, which seem to have been taken directly from *Lacrimosa of Dana*. For better or worse, *Ys IX* feels a little too derivative – in the sense that it lifts much of its game design directly from *Ys VIII*, such as how its side quests and base progression work, without feeling as thematically appropriate for the new story and setting.

Meanwhile, the wholly new content in *Ys IX* is entirely too hit-or-miss – the areas, particularly early in the game, are lacking in terms of visual variety, and the soundtrack isn't quite as good as in other entries. The story, for what it's worth, gets rather interesting at the end – but it's hard to say that the game's pacing didn't suffer at all from the renewed emphasis on story.



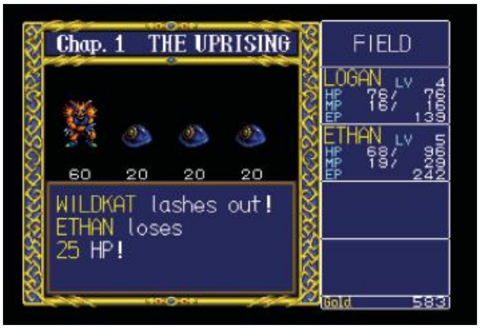
Dragon Slayer: The Legend of Heroes

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): MSX2, PC88, PC98, TG16CD, X68, MD, SFC, PCECD

The RPG scene in Japan changed drastically over the course of the '80s, with most developers moving over to console platforms. While early *Dragon Quest* games saw ports to the MSX, for the most part, if you wanted a game in that style, then you needed to buy a console. Previous *Dragon Slayer* games had been action RPGs, but Yoshio Kiya and Falcom wanted to make a console-style turn-based RPG, so they created one as the sixth entry in this series, titling it *The Legend of Heroes* (a.k.a. *Eiyuu Densetsu*).

Indeed, at first glance, it looks and plays similarly to *Dragon Quest*, complete with a first-person battle system. You play as Prince Selios, who initially lives a cozy little life bullying the local slime monsters, until his castle comes under attack and he's forced to flee. Fighting back against the usurpers, he gathers a party to venture out into the world.

However, there are many quality-of-life additions that make the game nice and comfortable. Enemies' HP is displayed beneath them during combat, you can save at any time, and if you die, you can either restart the battle or transport to the last town you visited, without any real penalty. Technically, there aren't any random battles – however, invisible monsters do roam around, so you need some special items to make them appear. Any of the characters can learn magic, though they can only memorise a certain number of spells at a time, and need to visit various sages to cycle them out. The narrative itself isn't anything innovative, but its storytelling feels slightly more like a *Final Fantasy* game than a *Dragon Quest* game.



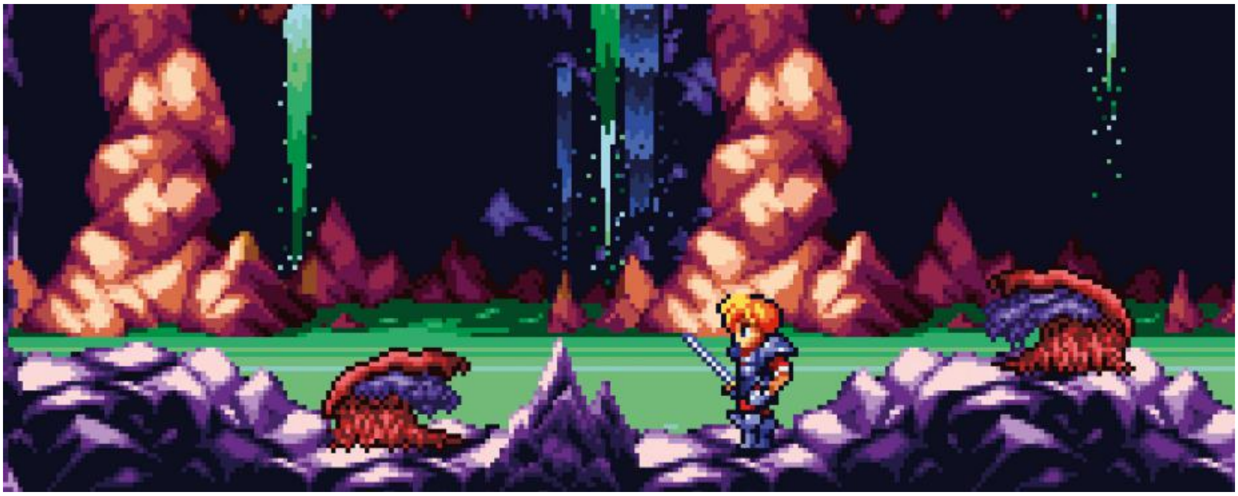
WILDKAT lashes out!
ETHAN loses
25 HP!

Falcom
SUPER
Dragon Slayer

The sequel takes place 20 years after the first game, featuring Atlas, the son of Prince Selios and Princess Dina. An earthquake has torn apart the land and revealed an expansive underground kingdom. Much of the game is very similar, even reusing many locales, though the magic system has been altered; foes are visible at all times without using any items, and you now recover health when moving.

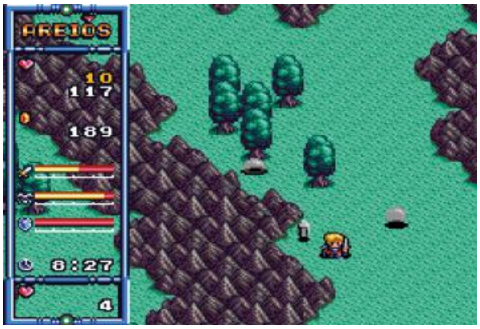
Both titles were ported widely beyond their initial PC release, with the SEGA Mega Drive getting one of the better ones, though only the PC Engine CD version of the first game made it into English. This version changes some of the names to sound like typical American names (Selios becomes Logan) and the voice acting is absolutely atrocious, especially the bad accents given to the characters. The CD soundtrack, arranged by Ryo Yonemitsu, sounds very similar to his work on the TurboGrafx-16 *Ys* games, though the compositions aren't quite as strong. Generally, compared to other 16-bit CD RPGs, it is a little lacking – there aren't any real cutscenes outside of the intro and ending, for example – but outside of some mandatory grinding, it's a very approachable game. However, the later entries in the *Legend of Heroes* series overshadow this one, as they're far more ambitious.

The final game in the *Dragon Slayer* series feels more like *Dragon Quest* than anything else, a sign of the changing times.



The Legend of Xanadu

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): PCECD



While Falcom's games were a huge success on video game consoles, particularly their *Ys* series, the company was primarily a computer developer, and all of the console ports were licensed to third parties like Hudson, so it didn't see much revenue from them. Seeking to find in-house success with a wider audience, it developed and published *The Legend of Xanadu*, a.k.a. *Kaze no Densetsu Xanadu* ("Legend of the Wind Xanadu") for the PC Engine Super CD. As with the *Ys* games, they took advantage of the CD platform, offering huge worlds, expansive cutscenes with lots of colourful characters, and voiced dialogue. It's considered the eighth part of the *Dragon Slayer* series, though, like all of the others, there's very little connection to its PC forebears, and it has almost nothing to do with the original *Xanadu*.

The game takes place in a world where magic use is commonplace. As the story goes, 1000 years ago, the legendary hero Aeneas fought the dragon Daldantis. He won and became the king. His descendent, Areios, is a soldier in the imperial city of Ishtar, and he must follow in the footsteps of his forefathers. Some of the visuals and the character names are taken from Greek mythology, although these references are only skin deep.

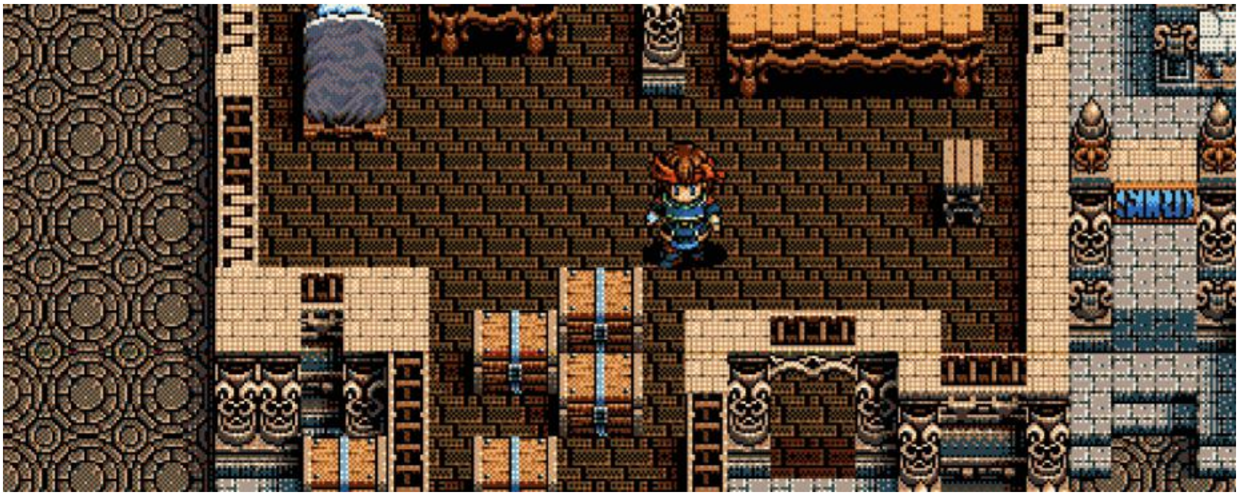
Legend of Xanadu is extremely similar to the *Ys* series, using the same bump combat system. Although you start the game as Areios, you eventually gain more party members, who fight in formation at his side, creating a veritable wall of destruction. The experience system is a little unusual, as you don't gain levels, per se, but your HP maximum is increased as you take damage. The equipment items – weapon, armour, and shield – also gain experience the more you use them.

The story is divided up into 12 chapters, each usually containing a number of dungeons and towns; you cannot revisit a completed area. Time flows forward through days and nights, which changes various events. Indeed, one of the biggest issues with this game is that it can be troublesome to find the flags necessary to advance the story, often requiring just running around and experimenting. At the end of each chapter, the perspective changes to a short side-scrolling action sequence. The difficulty of these is somewhat off balance, but they're a nice change of pace.

While other Falcom PC Engine games were known for embracing redbook audio, *The Legend of Xanadu* is surprisingly quaint, as nearly all of its soundtrack is chip-generated. It's a little disappointing, but the compositions are still top-tier. The graphics, outside of the side-scrolling areas, are underwhelming though.

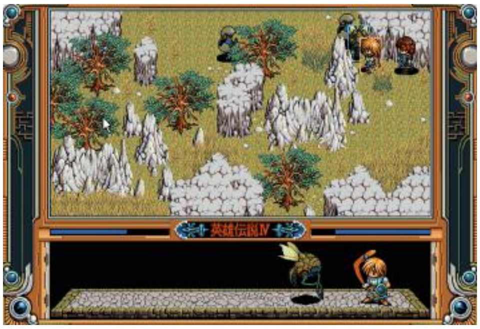
The sequel, which stars the same main cast and takes place three years after the first game, improves the graphics to bring it into line with other, later 16-bit RPGs. Otherwise, it's a pretty similar, albeit much shorter, game. *The Legend of Xanadu* series really didn't live beyond the PC Engine CD era, as Falcom instead went back to concentrating on the *Ys* series.

***The Legend of Xanadu* is basically Falcom ripping themselves off. They do a pretty good job!**



The Legend of Heroes (Gagharv Trilogy)

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): PC98, WIN, PS1, SAT, PSP



Yoshio Kiya, the creator of the *Dragon Slayer* series, left Falcom between the first and second *Legend of Xanadu* games, but the company continued on his *Legend of Heroes* series, though it ditched the *Dragon Slayer* branding. While styled after console RPGs, it evolved beyond its roots as a *Dragon Quest* clone into something more ambitious. This marked the start of the *Gagharv Trilogy*, otherwise known as *Legend of Heroes III, IV*, and *V*, all of which share the same basic look, feel, and mechanics. They all take place in the same world, divided by the titular Gagharv Abyss, albeit on different continents and at different points in time.

Legend of Heroes III is subtitled *Shiroki Majo*, meaning "White Witch", though the official English translation is *Prophecy of the Moonlight Witch*. The stars are two children, Chris and Jurio, who begin a pilgrimage across the land to visit six magical mirrors. Typically, those who gaze in them find something beautiful, but instead the children see something ominous, so they begin to hunt down the mystical white witch of the title in hopes of saving the country. *Legend of Heroes IV: A Tear of Vermillion*, focuses on a young man named Avin, who searches the continent for his long-lost sister. And *Legend of Heroes V: Song of the Ocean*, focuses on a group of travelling musicians – the young boy Forte, his friend Una, and his grandfather McBain (and his dog Jan) – as they explore the realm to find the 24 Resonance Stones, which contain powerful melodies that can be woven together into spectacular pieces of music.

Falcom strongly emphasised the narrative in these games, marketing *Shiroki Majo* as a "poetry RPG". The games' stories are nice, because they involve regular people going on journeys of self-discovery, exploring the history of the land, which result in them getting caught up in events much larger than themselves. In terms that may be more familiar to English-speaking RPG fans, they're a bit similar to the *Lunar* games, in the way that the main characters are closely bonded, with lots of dialogue exchanges, mixed with the expansive world-building of the *Suikoden* series.

Visually, all three games are more or less identical, though they take advantage of the high-resolution displays afforded by PCs to offer crisper visuals than on console RPGs of the time. The music is a little more laid-back than the action-heavy themes of *Ys*, but it's still high-quality Falcom. *Prophecy of the Moonlight Witch* and *Song of the Ocean* are the closest thematically and structurally, as they're both fairly linear, whereas *A Tear of Vermillion* is a little more typical in its plot and characters, but also more open-ended.

The battle system, particularly in the first release of *Shiroki Majo*, is a little unusual, in that you don't have much direct control over your characters. Instead, they act of their own accord, walking over to and attacking enemies based on a loose set of AI commands. Later versions as well as the sequels, give a little more control over your companions, but it's still pretty hands-off

The contrast in artwork between the PC version of *Shiroki Majo* (above) and the Saturn remake by Hudson (below) indicates the difference in marketing styles for the older, PC-based gamers and the younger console users.

SEGA SATURN
HUDSON

compared to other JRPGs. There's little in the way of character customisation too – indeed, the strength of these games is more in the narrative than the combat.

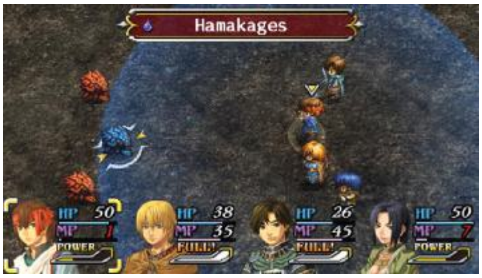
Shiroki Majo received a ground-up remake for the Saturn, courtesy of Hudson. This version revamps the game as a more typical console-style RPG, complete with brighter, anime-style character designs, full motion video cutscenes, voice acting, and a more typical turn-based battle system. The flashy makeover is so extensive that it feels out of place among the surrounding titles, but on its own merits, it's pretty decent. *Shiroki Majo* and *A Tear of Vermillion* received straighter ports to the PlayStation, though since the high resolution graphics were ported directly to the low resolution console, the graphics are super-zoomed in.

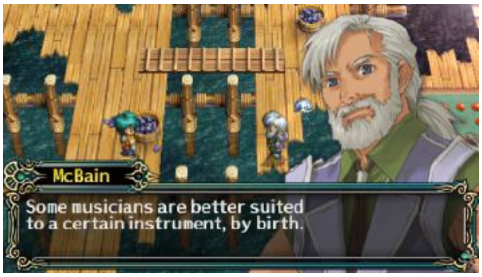
The whole trilogy was also remade and ported to the PSP, published by Namco Bandai. These versions are a little closer to the PC originals, using similar 2D character sprites but with 3D backgrounds. Major characters have large dialogue portraits, too. The battle and encounter systems have been changed to a more typical turn-based system that takes placement and distance into account, so it's similar to that in the *Lunar* games. All of these ports were released in English, though they were published out of order, with *Tear of Vermillion* coming first, then *Prophecy of the Moonlight Witch*, and finally *Song of the Ocean*. Since they take place out of order chronologically anyway, it doesn't really matter, though *Song of the Ocean* should be played last since it contains spoilers for the other two.

While the original series was extremely well regarded by Japanese fans in the '90s, the PSP releases were received rather more tepidly by English-speaking fans. This is partly due to the PSP ports being not particularly great: they're just kinda slow and ugly. Furthermore, the English translation in all three releases is pretty bad, as the dialogue is both awkward and lacking in character. For a series with such a huge emphasis on narrative, bad writing really is a killer blow.

But the series was, in many ways, pretty dated anyway. When the Gagharv Trilogy began in 1994, its contemporary was *Final Fantasy VI* on the Super Famicom, at a time when RPGs were really beginning to take their plotlines seriously, so Falcom's entries really stood out among their peers. But over a decade later, such storytelling was standard, and so what was once unique became just another RPG.

Still, the Gagharv Trilogy is an incredibly important series of titles for Falcom. Toshihiro Kondo, who became the president of Falcom in 2007, created a fan site for the series in the late '90s, before he was officially hired by the company. The basic storytelling style was drastically expanded and led to the creation of the *Kiseki/Trails* series, the next in the *Legend of Heroes* line, which grew to worldwide fame. So while these games feel almost quaint in comparison, they're still more than worthwhile, in that they laid the groundwork for the modern incarnation of Falcom.




McBain

Some musicians are better suited to a certain instrument, by birth.

PSP
The Legend of Heroes II
Prophecy of the Moonlight Witch

PSP
The Legend of Heroes
BANDAI

PSP
The Legend of Heroes III
Song of the Ocean

When the *Legend of Heroes* games finally came out in English, much of what made them special on their release in the '90s had become common in the 2000s. The poor localisations didn't help matters.

The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): WIN, PSP, PS3, PSV

Following in the footsteps of its popular *Legend of Heroes* Gagharv Trilogy, Falcom endeavoured to design a world larger and more detailed than their contemporaries had; in 2004, *The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky* (known in Japan as *Sora no Kiseki)* was released, and the sub-series has spawned numerous sequels and successors that continue to add substance to the continent of Zemuria and her myriad citizens to this very day. This game takes place in the Liberl Kingdom, a small coastal country bordered by greater powers; players take control of Estelle Bright and her adoptive brother Joshua as they travel the country, learning about its history, helping those in need, and fulfilling the requirements to become full-fledged Bracers – a sort of paramilitary organisation whose goals are to protect the peace and prosperity of the continent as a whole.

Trails in the Sky's gameplay works on a tactical RPG grid, not unlike that of *Grandia* or *Popolocrois.* Players move their characters across the grid, attacking enemies with a variety of regular attacks, Arts (spells), and Crafts (skills). While Arts use EP – Energy Points, which are very much akin to Mana or MP in other RPGs – Crafts instead use Craft Points, or CP. Characters gain CP by attacking enemies, taking damage, and in some cases as a buff associated with certain items, as a by product of certain Crafts, and more.

Battles use a turn-based system, in which players can always see the turn order on their screens. Arts require a casting time to use, which can be tracked both when choosing the Arts, and at any time on the battle's timeline, displayed on the left side of the screen. Part of *Trails in the Sky*'s battle system's depth is in micro-managing your parties' actions to best align with the various buffs assigned to turns on the timeline – these buffs (or in some cases, debuffs) don't actually move location on the timeline, but actions that take place during combat can re-arrange which party member or enemy might get that buff. These can include, for example, HP/EP regeneration, guaranteed critical damage on that turn.

Prince Olivert
Just whom shall I gather into my arms like a warm blanket and exchange sweet nothings in celebration first?

PSP
The Legend of Heroes
Trails in the Sky

***Trails in the Sky* games began on the PC, but really took off when they were ported to the PSP, which caused Falcom to refocus their attention onto the platform.**

Trails in the Sky's largest combat-related gimmick, by far, concerns exactly how party composition is handled. As well as having traditional equipment slots for armour, weapons, and accessories – players can influence both the stats and the available Arts of any party member, by slotting Quartz into each character's Orbment. These contraptions have different slots and lines for different party members, and depending on the number and type of Quartz on each of these lines, characters will gain access to newer and stronger Arts as they progress through the game. *Trails in the Sky* doesn't allow players to automate this process, so players will inevitably become familiar with it by the time they finish *Trails in the Sky*'s story.

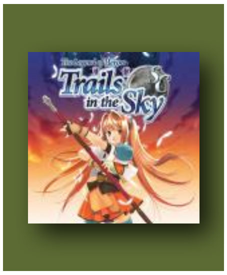
Trails in the Sky is split across three games – each of them following up and expanding upon world-building and plot threads from the previous entry. While the first game in the trilogy, colloquially known as *FC* or *First Chapter*, has your party unravelling a political conspiracy that threatens to topple Liberl's political structure, *SC* or *Second Chapter* (2005) deals with a larger threat that has the potential to endanger Zemuria as a whole. Along the way, players learn more about the histories of both country and continent, as well as those of our protagonists.

Trails in the Sky: The 3rd (2007) is in a weird situation where, despite the "3" in the title, the game is just as much of a prologue for the next arcs in the series, as it is a send-off for the cast from *Trails in the Sky*. It's definitely an odd duck for the series, even now – not only does the set of protagonists switch, from Estelle and Joshua Bright to two supporting characters, Kevin Graham and Ries Argent, but both the structure of the narrative and the gameplay loop take a stance as of yet unseen in the rest of the series. Instead of travelling a country and completing side quests, the player's party descends into Phantasma, an ethereal realm where the scriptural entities manifest, and the histories of countries and individuals are laid bare. *The 3rd* plays like much more of a dungeon crawler, and instead of traditional side quests, side stories and mini-games can be found locked behind Memory Doors. It's also the first entry to introduce areas where the "higher" elements play into combat – in which three of the games' elemental types (unrelated to their "regular" elements) prove more effective.

The defining characteristic of *Trails in the Sky*, and the *Trails* series in general, is probably the care and detail put into the games' respective worlds. Nearly every NPC has unique dialogue that will change as players complete quests and progress the story, with select NPCs from as early as *Trails in the Sky: FC* reappearing as recently as in the *Trails of Cold Steel* titles a decade later.

This might seem surprising, considering today's market, but although *Trails in the Sky* eventually saw releases on both the PlayStation Portable and PlayStation 3, the series started its life as a Windows PC exclusive. Indeed, even with the trilogy's Western release, *Trails in the Sky: The 3rd* has only ever been officially released on PC, and *Trails in the Sky: SC*'s Western PSP release lacks some of the polish of the official western PC version. We never received the series' PS3 versions, although their assets were incorporated into Marvelous USA's PC versions.

Only released officially in Japan, enhanced *Evolution* versions of the *Trails in the Sky* trilogy, for the PlayStation Vita, were published by Chara-Ani, complete with redone character portraits, voice acting, and balancing changes to combat, to bring the games more into line with the revised combat introduced in later entries.



Estelle Bright is the main protagonist in the first two entries in this series, alongside a roster full of interesting and likeable characters.

***Trails in the Sky* runs on the same basic engine as *Ys VI*, and shares a similar visual style, with 2D sprites on 3D backgrounds, reminiscent of the PlayStation era of JRPGs.**

The Legend of Heroes (Crossbell)

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): WIN, PSP, PS4

After releasing the first two titles in the *Trails* sub-series, developer Falcom started work on the next arc of the series' story – to take place in a different country, with a different set of characters, and with some additions and changes to gameplay. While *Trails in the Sky: The 3rd* (2007) would go on to set the stage for this next arc, and others to come, it would be Falcom's departure from the PC gaming market that would most influence the trajectory that the series would take going forward. Despite the series' history of releasing on PC first and PlayStation Portable later, *Zero no Kiseki* and *Ao no Kiseki* – "Trails from Zero" and "Trails to Azure" respectively – were released first on PSP, with only *Zero no Kiseki* receiving an official PC release from Falcom later down the line.

Taking place within the city-state of Crossbell, players have taken to calling these titles the Crossbell duology. As the first true follow-ups to *Trails in the Sky*, both games share most of their DNA with their direct predecessors, rather than subsequent games. Both titles have a nearly identical art style to that found in *Trails in the Sky*, with the main difference being that Katsumi Enami (who also worked with Falcom on *Ys Seven*) handled the character portraits. The use of gameplay components like the Orbment system, Arts and Crafts, and others make this more of an iteration of *Trails in the Sky*, rather than a true generational leap – smaller changes, like the introduction of group attacks and both Combination Crafts and Support Crafts, expand the scope of the systems from *Trails in the Sky*, rather than overhauling these systems entirely.

What truly sets the Crossbell games apart from *Trails in the Sky* has to be the story, its pacing, and the unique region that the games themselves take place in. Crossbell State is a trading hub wedged between two world powers in the land of Zemuria. Throughout the region's history, the nations of Erebonia and Calvard have fought over control of the territory, before eventually settling for a treaty declaring the area a buffer state. A land ripe with technology, more so than the rest of the continent, it struggles under the weight of these world powers, which control and stifle the populace – and just below the surface waits a powder keg waiting to blow.

ロイド

いや、知らないって。

The Crossbell duology shifts gears by focusing on a different region of the *Trails* game world, and introducing a new cast of characters.

While *Trails in the Sky*'s main casts centre around the duos of Estelle and Joshua Bright, or Kevin Graham and Ries Argent, Crossbell's main cast starts out as a full group of four. The Special Support Section, headed by Detective Lloyd Bannings, is part of the CSPD – the Crossbell State Police Department – and is tasked with settling problems that other branches of the force might be ill-equipped to deal with. In practice, they act more like Bracers – the paramilitary organisation that players were part of in *Trails in the Sky*. The Special Support Section also offers another unique dynamic halfway through *Zero no Kiseki*, when the mysterious child KeA is adopted into the family, who work tirelessly to determine her history; the Section begins to uncover many of the schemes unfolding within the city walls.

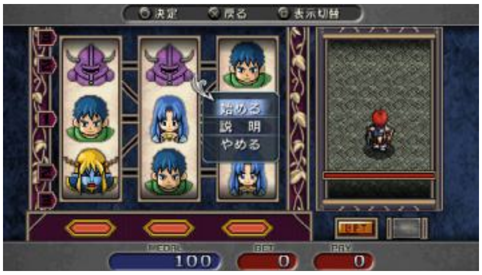
Whereas *Trails in the Sky*'s story had players moving from one region of a larger country to the next, Crossbell features a much greater emphasis on its central city. While players will explore and learn more about Crossbell as a whole, even outside of the state's metropolis, these games are unique in the series for their near total emphasis on their major defining location. By the end of *Ao no Kiseki*, players will know the city as well as they would their own neighbourhood – a fact that Falcom clearly understands, and takes advantage of later on in the series.

The Crossbell games offer a variety of non-essential gameplay additions that would later grow to constitute more and more of the series' identity, especially from *Ao no Kiseki* onwards. Mini-games like Pom-to, or expansions to the fishing side activity, help flesh out the experience as well as the game-world. Master Quartz – a gameplay system that would be expanded upon in later entries – started life in *Ao no Kiseki*. Bonding Events from *Trails of Cold Steel* can be traced back to certain events that players were given choices about in Crossbell. Even voice acting, which was originally limited to battle cries in *Trails in the Sky* – and originally only on PSP – was expanded to include actual dialogue during select scenes in both Crossbell titles.

As at the time of writing, neither Crossbell title has been officially released in English, nor has a localisation been announced. It's incredibly unlikely that either of the original PSP versions of the games will ever come over in an official capacity, though both *Zero* and *Ao no Kiseki* currently have fan translations of varying quality. The official PC version of *Zero no Kiseki* received a rather extensive translation that included a variety of performance improvements and quality-of-life additions, thanks to the fine folks at Geofront, but the chances that such an effort might be made with *Ao no Kiseki* seem slim. Unlike *Zero no Kiseki*, Falcom never officially released *Ao no Kiseki* on PC in Japan – while a PC version exists, it was primarily released for other Asian territories, and there's no easy way for fans in the West to buy a copy for themselves, unlike with *Zero*.

Thankfully, Falcom recently unveiled new PS4 versions of the Crossbell duology, complete with additions and changes: bringing some characters from *Trails of Cold Steel* into story scenes where it might make sense for them to appear, alongside higher resolution and quality-of-life improvements. While a localisation has yet to be confirmed at this time, it looks as if bringing the titles to a Western audience in an official capacity is finally a long term goal for the company.

The *Trails* games are all linked to one another, and the fact that the Crossbell games are not currently officially available in English means *Trails* is like an epic novel with several chapters missing.

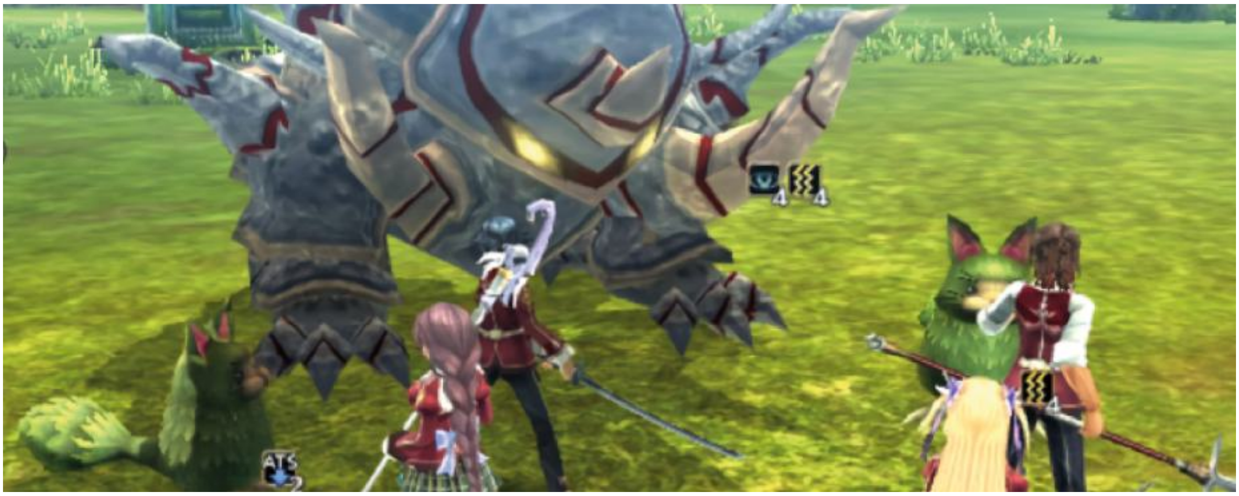


セルゲイ課長
リベール製――
ZCFの新型だ。

鉱山町マインツ
導力車を戻す
スクロール
ズーム
戻る
クロスベル市

EP HEAL
詳細情報
DELAY 71

ランディ
こいつはワジとノエル向きか？



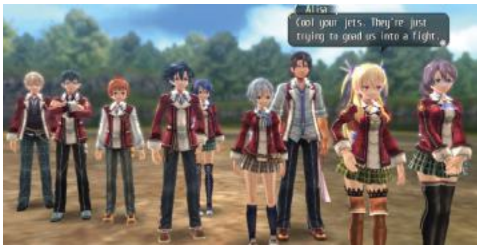
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2013 | Platform(s): WIN, PSP, PS3, PSV, PS4, NSW

With Falcom's release of *The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel* on PlayStation 3 and Vita back in 2013, the *Legend of Heroes Trails* sub-series saw its first major overhaul – while *Zero* and *Ao no Kiseki* could be seen as an evolution of *Trails in the Sky*'s concept, with very similar overhead art styles, battle systems, and general mechanics – Falcom's stated goal with *Trails of Cold Steel* was to offer an entry allowing new fans to latch onto the series. After five games in a row that more or less expected players to have explored the worlds of the previous entries before starting, *Trails of Cold Steel* instead offered a fresh chance for players to get started with the series.

From a gameplay standpoint, almost every aspect of the *Trails* design ethos got an overhaul for *Cold Steel*. The graphics shifted from pre-rendered models for character sprites to full, true 3D character models. The isometric view was ditched for an over-the-shoulder camera, which players could control for themselves, by means of the PlayStation 3's and Vita's dual analogue sticks. Although *Zero no Kiseki* started out life as a PC title, *Trails of Cold Steel* was a console JRPG from the very beginning, and took plenty of inspiration from some of its contemporaries.

The once-confusing Orbment system has been simplified – instead of lines determining which Arts a character could learn, Quartz now directly offer certain Arts, as well as buffs to certain stats. What's been lost in equipment complexity is made up for by a combat system that better emphasises your party dynamics – Combat Links allow party members to follow up on attacks, automatically heal you, and more. These same Combat Links could be strengthened by just playing with the same characters in a party, of course – but links between main character


Alisa
Cool your jets. They're just trying to goad us into a fight.

Rean Schwarzer and the rest of the party can also be increased by viewing Bonding Events; little vignettes that help the player learn more about their party members' values, interests, and so on. There are initially nine students in Class VII, including Rean, each from different backgrounds, and many of the field missions involve exploring the part of the Empire they come from. Most amusing is Sara Valestein, a veteran Bracer and surprisingly laid-back homeroom teacher.

Perhaps the largest difference, and the one that draws the most comparisons to certain other JRPG series, is *Trails of Cold Steel*'s setting. While the Erebonian Empire's society is divided between royalty and commoners, with the former enjoying privileges the latter lack, in a world that changes by the day, most of *Cold Steel*'s plot takes place at Thors Military Academy, complete with quizzes, field activities, and more. Players get to see the tensions between those in the country who would prefer to put the aging political system behind them, and those who will fight to preserve the status quo.

After certain events in the story, the arc includes a number of Divine Knight mech battles that break up the pacing. These offer a different sort of combat flow: instead of moving your character on the battlefield to position yourself

Trails of Cold Steel

***Trails of Cold Steel* introduces some social elements, as you can explore the campus of Thors' Academy and spend time with your classmates or teachers.**

for attacks, you target specific spots on an opposing mech in order to best counter their movements. Usually these battles happen at key moments in the story.

Another key characteristic of the *Cold Steel* story arc is its scale – while *Trails in the Sky* technically featured three entries, most would argue that *Trails in the Sky: The 3rd* was more of its own thing. Meanwhile, Crossbell (*Zero* and *Ao no Kiseki)* took two games to complete its over-arching story. *Trails of Cold Steel* has four main titles in its arc – including two of the longest titles in the series by both total word-count and playtime. The second game moves away from the school setting – Erebonia has fallen into civil war, and Rean must track down his old classmates, and the third sees Rean return to Thors Academy as an instructor.

In fact, partially owing to how late the first two *Trails of Cold Steel* came out in both the PlayStation 3's and Vita's life cycles – *Cold Steel* is so far the only *Trails* arc that made the jump from one platform to another mid-story. Both *Trails of Cold Steel III* and *Trails of Cold Steel IV* were originally released as PlayStation 4 exclusives in Japan. While NIS America brought *Trails of Cold Steel III* and *IV* to both Nintendo Switch and PC, these ports didn't come until much later in each game's life cycle.

Owing to this jump in hardware, the differences between the first two and the second two are significant, more so than between *Trails in the Sky First Chapter* and *Second Chapter*, or *Zero no Kiseki* and *Ao no Kiseki*. Ironically enough, although *Trails of Cold Steel* was initially designed as a beginner-friendly entry in the series, both *Cold Steel III* and *IV* rely rather heavily on callbacks to previous entries in the series, including the currently Japan-only Crossbell games. While the games themselves do offer enough explanation to avoid confusion for newcomers, it's hard to recommend them before players have first finished the rest of the series.

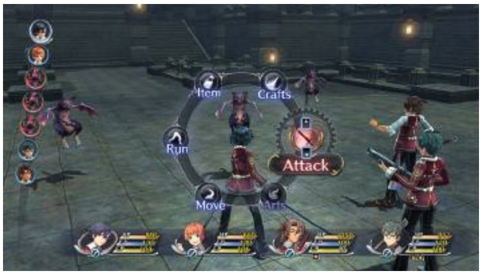
As of right now, it's incredibly difficult to say whether newly released *Trails into Reverie* in Japan should be classified as part of the *Cold Steel* series or not. Although Rean Schwarzer will play a role in the title, the game's narrative is divided into three, with characters from both Erebonia and Crossbell having their own stories to tell, alongside new ones. If *Cold Steel III* and *IV* are anything to go by, the game itself should be massive – especially if it's aiming to juggle three stories at once.

It's been over 15 years since the *Trails* sub-series started, and Zemuria's scope and scale have only continued to grow with every release. Although it's hard to recommend the series to just anyone, given how much of a commitment it can be to see it through to the end, with such a connected narrative and world, there's truly no other JRPG series like it.

TRAILS OF COLD STEEL III

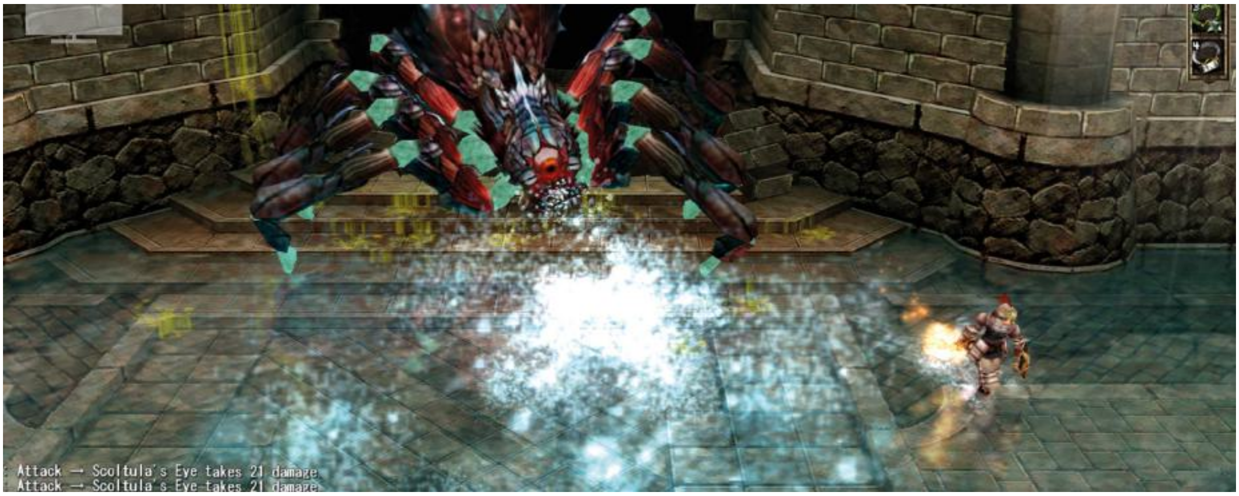
Consisting of four (extremely long) games that partially depend on having finished previous *Trails* games, completing the *Cold Steel* arc requires quite a commitment.

Principal Aurelia
This campus is a place they can toss aside those deemed too troublesome or those with problematic backgrounds.



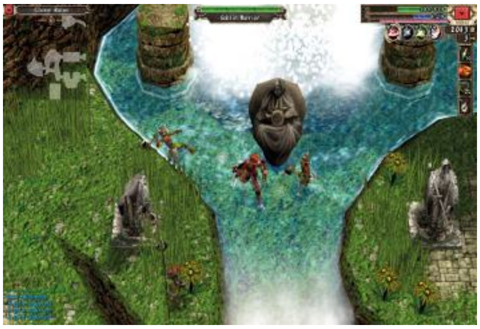
Elliot
She looks like she's having the time of her life...

The *Cold Steel* games shift to full 3D, making the series feel more modern than previous entries.


Attack → Scoltula's Eye takes 21 damage
Attack → Scoltula's Eye takes 21 damage

Xanadu Next

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): WIN, NGAGE



Xanadu Next was released to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the original *Xanadu.* The main character is a knight, who has wandered aimlessly since a war, but now sets off to explore the mystical Strangerock Castle on Harlech Island. Upon beginning his exploration of the ruins, his quest seemingly comes to an ignoble end when he's slaughtered by a mysterious swordsman, only to be resurrected via the power of spirits called Guardians. Their aid can only sustain the hero's renewed life for so long though, so he begins his journey again, seeking to make his resurrection more permanent.

The action is primarily controlled via mouse and keyboard, though there is support for a gamepad. It feels close to something like *Diablo,* in which you move and attack by pointing and clicking. However, all of the levels are pre-designed, and there isn't nearly the same focus on randomised loot. You do need to collect gold and other stuff to sell, so that you can afford to buy new weapons, as well as keys that will unlock new areas. (Amusingly, collected bones can be used to create skeleton keys.) You can distribute stats upon levelling up, which determines what kinds of weapon you can wield. Individual weapons will also teach your character skills, which, when levelled up appropriately, stay with them even when you equip other weapons.

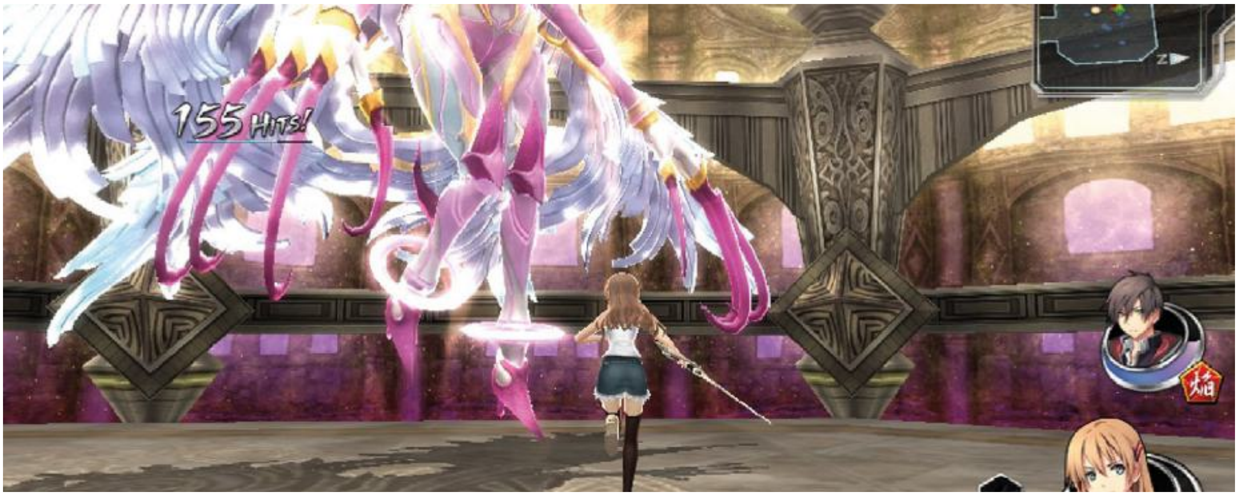
Harlech Town acts as the hub for the adventure, containing the usual shops and an inn, as well as a church where you can switch out your Guardian, which levels up independently from the hero and provides various stat boosts. Outside of town, there are several different areas, including various ruins, a forest, aqueducts, a volcano, a snowy mountain, and of course, Strangerock Castle. The maps are interconnected, so shortcuts can be opened up to make traversal easier, though there are warp portals too.

The story is fairly minimal, and the only other notable character is a scholar, a childhood friend who has hired the hero to be her bodyguard and who stays at the local inn. The music is low-key compared to that of the *Ys* titles, but it's both haunting and beautiful, and is a wonderful accompaniment to the hacking and slashing.

Outside of borrowing its main theme and a few old references, there's not much that connects it to the *Dragon Slayer* series of old ... but it does hearken back to the days of early Japanese RPGs, in that it feels very much like a Western title. It maintains the Japanese approach to tight combat and level design, making it a unique cultural blend.

A version of *Xanadu Next* was released in North America for the ill-fated N-Gage mobile phone/portable console, but it's a completely different game from the computer version, being much smaller, and suffering from terrible controls and an intolerable frame rate. The original Windows version was released in English by XSeed in 2016, a decade after its initial release.

***Xanadu Next* is a brilliant blend of old and new, a crossing point of Western and Japanese RPG design.**



Tokyo Xanadu

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2015 | Platform(s): PSV, PS4, WIN

Much as *Xanadu Next* was a 20th anniversary game celebrating one of Falcom's earliest titles, *Tokyo Xanadu* was developed for its 30th. However, while *Xanadu Next* at least paid some tribute to retro RPGs, *Tokyo Xanadu,* title aside, is almost entirely unrelated to it. It stars a young man named Kou, living in a modern Japanese city, who discovers an alternate dimension filled with demons, called the Eclipse. He meets a girl named Asuka, part of a group called Nemesis, which seeks to close all of the portals between these two worlds.

There's a lot about *Tokyo Xanadu* that seems reminiscent of the modern *Persona* games, particularly in how you divide time between exploring the main city, running through the dungeons of Eclipse, and socialising with your fellow classmates, many of whom are also members of Nemesis and fight alongside you. However, the social sim elements are a smaller part, and ultimately it ends up feeling more like an offshoot of Falcom's *Trails of Cold Steel* series; the interface and style of music is almost exactly the same, and it even includes an alternate version of one of *Cold Steel*'s characters, teacher Towa Kokonoe, as a bit of fan service.

In contrast to the turn-based battle systems in *Trails of Cold Steel, Tokyo Xanadu* is all action based. Falcom has some experience with creating fun and exciting combat, as seen in its *Ys* games, and it works similarly here. Up to three characters can join you in dungeon crawling; they are governed by AI and can be switched between to use their unique weapons. Kou has a cool sword-whip, similar to Ragna's in *Zwei 2.* However, in contrast to the beautiful dungeons of *The Legend of Nayuta*, the dungeons here are pretty boring; they're the type that have lots of corridors and large rooms with repetitive scenery, which look like they're randomly generated, but they're not. The combat is fun, but combined with the disappointingly middling soundtrack, it all feels rather blasé.

Sora

Kou, Asuka, please be careful!

That sentiment permeates every other aspect of *Tokyo Xanadu.* So much of the story is drawn from other sources, but it's just not nearly as well executed. Kou is a boring wet blanket as a protagonist, most of the other characters are typical anime archetypes (there's even a subplot involving pop idols, another aspect that veers too closely towards ripping off *Persona 4*), and it takes forever for anything interesting to happen. Some of these are issues with Falcom's *Trails* series as well, particularly the slow pacing and character tropes, but at least those games had rich histories, with several games' worth of world-building, while *Tokyo Xanadu* lacks that level of lore. The end result is a game that's acceptably fun but not particularly compelling.

Initially released for the Vita, the later PlayStation 4 and Windows release, dubbed *Tokyo Xanadu ex+*, adds a few extra chapters focusing on a mysterious character called White Shroud, who originally spent most of the story in the shadows. On a technical level, this release runs at a much higher resolution and with a smoother frame rate than in the rather choppy Vita release, making the combat more satisfying.

PS VITA
東京ザナドゥ
TOKYO XANADU

Compared to *Xanadu Next, Tokyo Xanadu* is really related to the old *Dragon Slayer* games in name only – it's more of a *Trails* game in a modern setting.

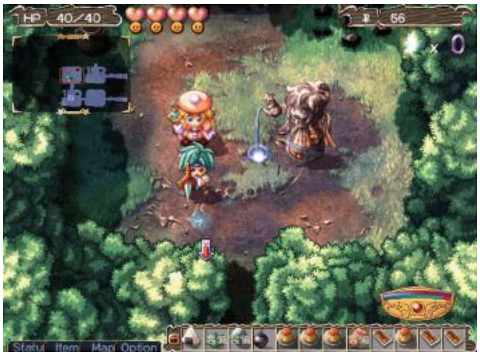
Zwei: The Arges Adventure

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2001 | Platform(s): WIN, PS2, PSP

Zwei is a series of cutesy dungeon crawlers from Falcom. The name, German for "two", comes from the fact that you control (and can switch between) two different characters. The story takes place on a floating continent called Arges, where a masked man has stolen six goddess statues in order to resurrect the dark lord Vesper. Two village kids, Pipiro and Pokkle, explore the dungeons of the continent in a hunt to recover the statues.

The word "dungeons" is used loosely here, because this is an extremely colourful game. Nearly everything (outside of the bosses) is rendered in gorgeous SVGA 2D, and it's quite pretty. The fantastic soundtrack has a jaunty serenity, similar to that of works like Yasunori Mitsuda's *Chrono Cross*. The interplay between Pipiro and Pokkle is also a highlight – Pokkle has a thing for the ladies and a fondness for puns, while Pipiro is almost pure sass.

Combat is simple and rarely evolves beyond mashing buttons – Pokkle attacks with a spear-like weapon, Pipiro uses magic – and the puzzles are similarly uncomplicated. You can find and raise a pet, who helps out in combat. The food-based experience system is unique – you can eat any grub you find in the dungeons, but if you return to the village, you can combine those ingredients into meals that heal you better and grant more points. Otherwise, compared with Falcom's earlier *Brandish* series, it's fairly mindless, and really relies on its pleasant aesthetic and amusing sense of humour to get by. Still, it was popular enough to receive PS2 and PSP ports, and eventually received an English release in 2018 from XSeed.



One of Falcom's properties, created in the early 2000s amidst Windows ports of older games, *Zwei* is cute and charming, but somewhat shallow.

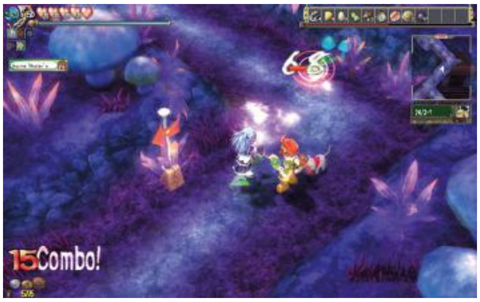
Zwei: The Ilvard Insurrection

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): WIN

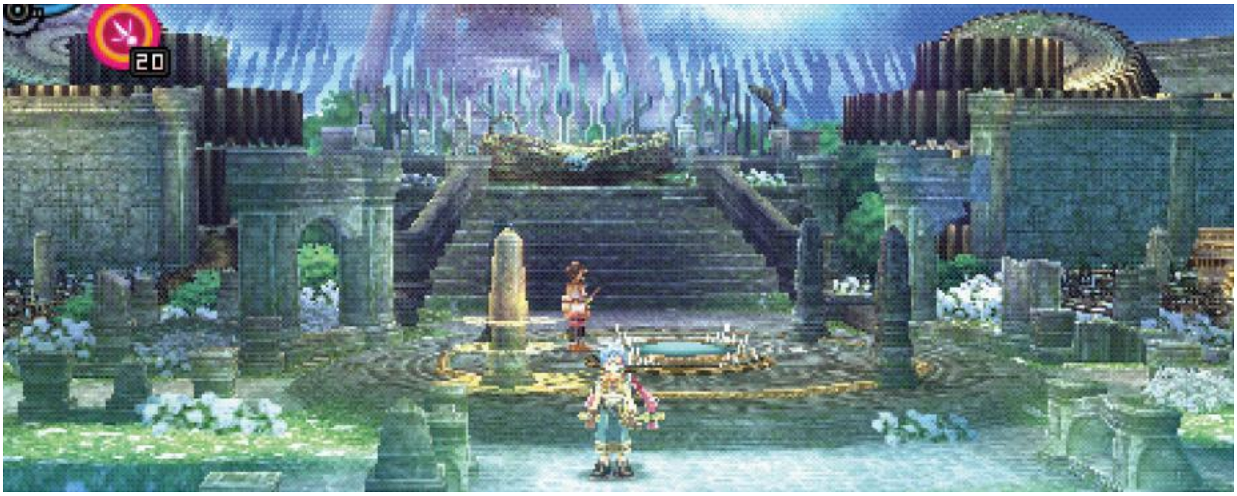
The second *Zwei* game focuses on a treasure hunter named Ragna, who crash-lands his plane onto the continent of Ilvard. His life is saved by a vampire princess named Alwen. She has been stripped of her magic and is looking for her missing castle, so she uses Ragna's near death experience to make a Blood Knight (i.e. servant) out of him. After some initial squabbling, the two establish a more amicable relationship, and set out to find Alwen's lost magic.

The action has moved into 3D in this second entry, using cel shading that gives a simple and clean anime look to the characters. The action feels smoother too, though it's still pretty simple. Your characters can now jump, and there are simple platforming challenges throughout the dungeons. It uses an isometric perspective, though the camera feels a little too zoomed-in. The pet types have been expanded, so in addition to the cats and dogs found in the first game, you can also journey along with birds and fairies. A gaudy new casino called the G-Colosseum has been added, plus an Adventurer's Guild, where you can sell treasures found on your journey.

While the smoother combat makes this a substantial improvement over its predecessor, *Zwei II* is still fundamentally a simple action RPG that relies on its charm to get by. It's short enough that it doesn't wear out its welcome, but at the same time, it's still not quite up to the level of Falcom's better output. Plus, it feels like some of the spirit of the first game is missing. Ragna and Alwen don't quite have the same goofy interplay as Pipiro and Pokkle (who do make cameos), and while the soundtrack is decent, it's nowhere near the quality of the original.

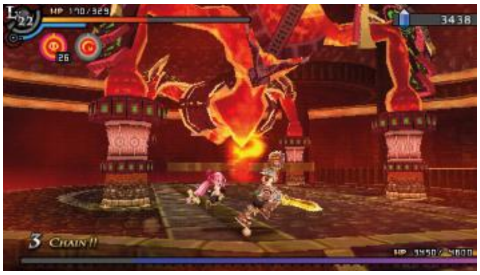


Zwei II makes the transition to 3D fairly well, though the 2D artwork and the beautiful soundtrack of its predecessor are missed.



The Legend of Nayuta: Boundless Trails

Developer: Falcom | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): PSP



***The Legend of Nayuta* is closer to being a third *Zwei* game than an actual *Kiseki/Trails* title, though it's still quite good.**

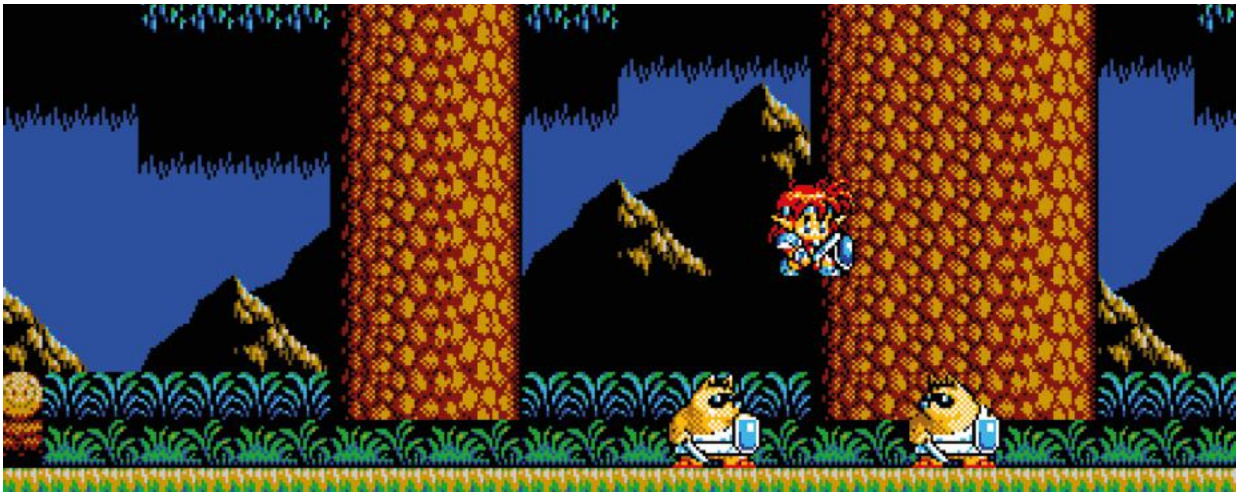
Nayuta Herschel is a young boy who lives on an island surrounded by a seemingly infinite ocean. Most of its denizens believe that they are the last survivors on the planet, but Nayuta believes differently, owing to the star fragments that drop out of the sky like meteors. One day, a huge set of ruins collapses into the sea, leading him to explore; he finds a tiny fairy named Noi. Together, they discover a different world, called Lost Heaven, and explore it to uncover what happened in the world's distant past.

The Legend of Nayuta: Boundless Trails shares a name with one of Falcom's big RPG series, known in English as *Trails of the Sky* and *Trails of Cold Steel*. The initial concept was to create an action game similar to their famous *Ys* games, rather than the turn-based games that defined the core *Kiseki* series. In practice, it didn't quite work – beyond using the name, and sharing some similar art and music, the connections to the core *Kiseki/Trails* series are extremely sparse: some naming conventions and a few cameos for Mishy, the feline mascot. Anyone expecting the epic storytelling or gigantic cast of characters of the mainline *Kiseki* games will be disappointed, as there's little of those here, either.

Otherwise, the game more closely resembles Falcom's *Zwei* series, in that there's no overworld, but rather a map screen where you can choose from various levels. It even uses the same concept of gathering and cooking food to gain experience points. However, while those games' levels were fairly simple dungeon crawls, the stages in *The Legend of Nayuta* are much more elaborate, taking advantage of the third dimension to create sprawling stages with plenty of platforming challenges – in function, this game resembles the likes of Square's *Brave Fencer Musashi* on the PlayStation. Noi travels alongside Nayuta and casts spells, but also has access to Gear Craft skills, which can be used to grapple from certain points, or encase the duo in a gigantic wheel, allowing them to roll around the stages. The action is slower than in the *Ys* games, but no less satisfying – Falcom has a habit of creating satisfying combat that puts its games in a different league from comparable action RPGs by other companies.

As you play through the game, the seasons in each continent cycle – this not only changes the look of the stage, but also the landscape, changing up enemies or sending you down different paths. There are plenty of optional challenges and items to find – like the second *Zwei* game, this one has a museum that you can fill with the artefacts you find, an interesting way to document the lost civilisation you're uncovering. The music is excellent, as with most Falcom games, and the visuals are extraordinarily colourful, managing to shine even on the low resolution of the PSP screen.

The Legend of Nayuta was initially only released for the PSP in Japan, which does no favours to its otherwise gorgeous visual design, though an HD port was released in 2021, and a localisation scheduled for 2023. It may have been disappointing to series fans, but on its own, it's a great game.



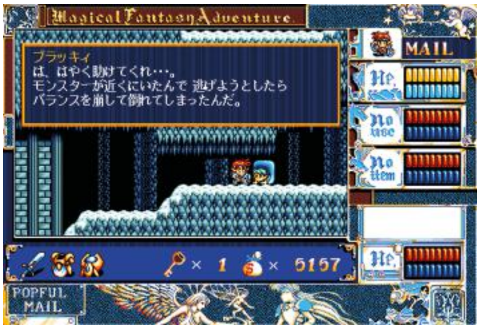
Popful Mail

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, SCD, PCECD, SFC

Created by Falcom and directed by Yoshio Kiya of the *Dragon Slayer* games, *Popful Mail* is a fun little side-scrolling action RPG with anime-style graphics and loads of personality. It stars a pink-haired elven bounty hunter named Mail. Her wacky adventures heavily resemble those of Lina Inverse in *Slayers*, which at this point in time (late 1991) was a fairly popular light novel series, before gaining worldwide recognition with its later anime series. The Japanese title is technically *Poppuru Mail*, which was changed to the slightly easier to pronounce *Popful Mail* for English release – it still isn't exactly a word, but is meant to emphasise her bubbly personality.

Compared to the more hardcore RPGs that preceded it, *Popful Mail* is styled after console games. Levels are linked with a *Super Mario Bros. 3* -style world map, and the action is displayed from a side-scrolling perspective. There are also a number of cute and colourful cutscenes that relate the story, in which Mail and her friends become embroiled in a scheme to resurrect old demons in order to create chaos around the realm. The stages run through the usual video game tropes, including a jungle, a volcano, underground mines, and an ice kingdom (complete with ridiculously cute penguins). There are two other playable characters – Tatt, a magician in training, and Gaw, a bat creature.

There are technically four different versions of the game. The PC88/98 versions have short, squat characters, and look somewhat like *Legacy of the Wizard*. Mêlée combat is like that in *Ys*, in which you just bump into enemies, though projectile weapons like throwing daggers and magic spells can be used to attack from a distance. The PC Engine CD version, released by NEC Avenue, is based on this version, with some new cutscenes, enhanced graphics, voice acting and a few extra levels.

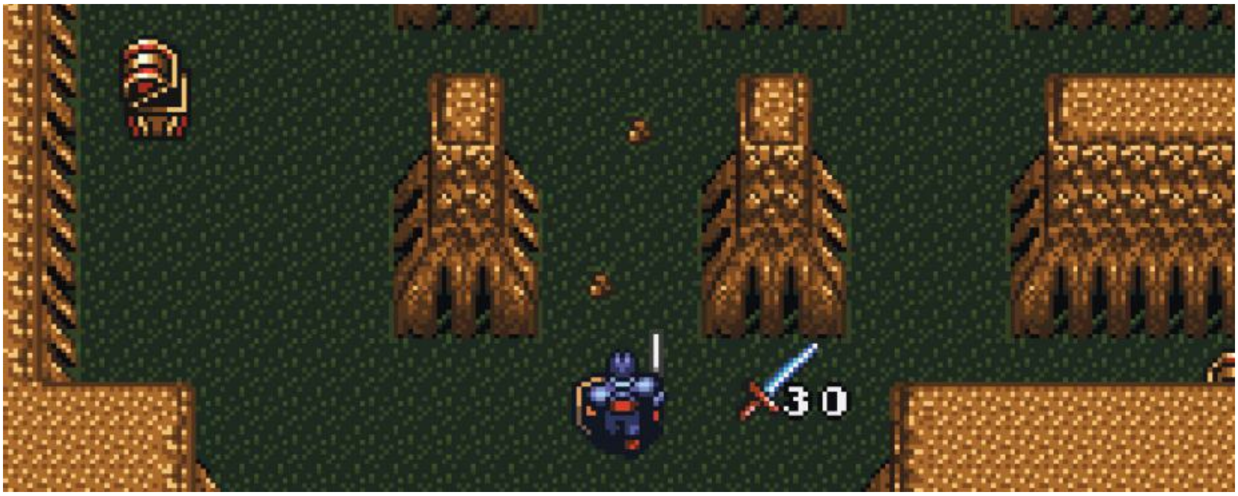


ブラッキィ
は、はやく助けてくれ…。
モンスターが近くにいたんで 逃げようとしたら
バランスを崩して倒れてしまったんだ。

The SEGA CD version is the most well-known, since it was released in English in North America. Developed by SEGA and SIMS, it redoes the whole game in the style of Westone's *Monster World* games. The graphics are totally different, with much larger character sprites, and it removes the bump combat in favour of regular sword swinging. Initially, SEGA planned to replace Mail with their own character, a sister of Sonic the Hedgehog, but fan outcry led them to create a more faithful version. The localisation takes a lot of liberties, like most Working Designs games, but, besides a few dated pop culture references, maintains its complete silliness. However, some unnecessary balance tweaks make the localised version much more difficult.

The Super Famicom version was developed by Falcom themselves, and while it's similar to the SEGA CD release in how it looks and controls, it's a totally different game. The graphics are completely different, and the level designs have changed drastically too. The controls are a little bit awkward, and this being a cartridge release, it lacks the cutscenes and voice acting of the other versions.

Despite the many versions of *Popful Mail*, there were no real sequels, but it did spin off into a series of audio drama CDs.



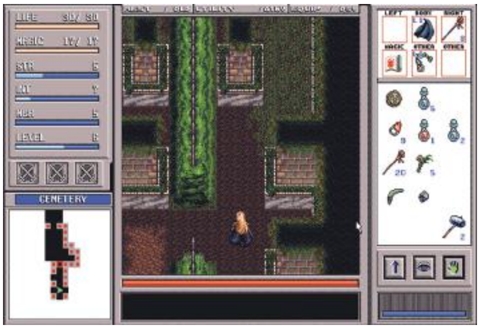
Brandish

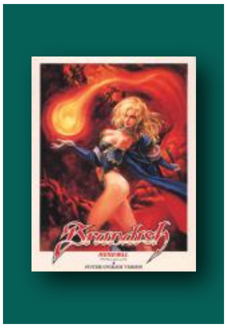
Developer: Falcom | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): PC98, FMT, PCECD, SNES, SFC, PSP

Brandish is a series of overhead dungeon crawlers from Falcom, directed by Yoshio Kiya. They are known for their rather unique (and uniquely infuriating) perspective – instead of the character turning left and right, the player characters are always facing upward, and the world rotates around them. It's as if you took a first-person dungeon crawler like *Dungeon Master*, then displayed it from an overhead viewpoint. The movements are tile-based and aren't at all smooth, and the whole world shifts suddenly in 90° angles every time you turn. Needless to say, the first play of a *Brandish* game is massively disorienting.

Beyond that, *Brandish* is fairly classical. You pilot your character, scavenging for weapons and magic, finding keys, flipping switches, hunting for fake walls, and finding the exit to the next floor. Occasionally, you'll be asked to solve some simple puzzles, which are usually spelled out via helpful plaques. You'll also have to deal with traps, which include everything from arrows to gigantic boulders. There are plenty of enemies of course, as well as some boss fights every now and then. Due to the tile-based movement, combat is rather clumsy and takes some adjusting to. Thankfully all of the *Brandish* games include an automap, one of the few things that helps keep the exploration from becoming too dizzying. There's also a Rest function that allows you to regain all of your HP and MP at any time – however, it also leaves you defenceless, so you'd better only nap when there are no bad guys around.

There are four games in the *Brandish* series. In the first, you control a warrior named Ares, who's trapped in a series of underground ruins, through which he's being chased by a woman named Dela. She, unsurprisingly, became the far more popular character, given that she's a gorgeous blonde wearing bikini armour. The sequel, subtitled *Planet Buster* (it's the name of a powerful sword) is far more ambitious, with many more locales, not just cavernous dungeons. The third, *Spirit of Balcan* (pictured directly above), expands the roster to four characters, allowing gamers to play as Ares or Dela, along with two new faces: Umber, a female wrestler, and Jinza, a ninja. The fourth, also known as *Brandish VT*, drastically mixes up the formula by switching to an isometric perspective and removing the screen rotation. The storytelling is sparse, but the first three games are connected. The first two were ported to the Super Famicom; the original (pictured in header) was released in English.





The Japanese PC artwork for *Brandish* (above) was provided by Isutoshi, who is mostly known for erotic artwork nowadays, as well as for the manga *Furies: Silver Wings in Empty Sky*, while the SFC/SNES has cover art by Nobuteru Yuuki (*Escaflowne, Chrono Cross*).

A PSP remake subtitled *Dark Revenant* was released in 2009 and localised by XSeed, though it was only released digitally in English. Now rendered entirely in 3D, it allows for smooth rotation when turning, making it much less confusing. It's still pretty faithful, but also includes a new, separate quest, in which you control Dela. It's also a great remake, but the sequels are so much more fully-featured that it's a shame they didn't revive one of those instead.

Dragon Quest

Dragon Quest is undoubtedly the most important of the Japanese role-playing game series. It certainly wasn't the first, but it did make the genre appealing and accessible for the average gamer. In the early '80s, many RPGs were difficult and inscrutable, often requiring hours of play, or complicated strategy guides, to get anywhere. The Famicom, however, was the "Family Computer", aimed at a wide audience, including children. Therefore, in the first *Dragon Quest* game, the story is relatively simple, and the world fairly small, but it works well to ease an audience into this style of game. The game takes the overworld exploration of the *Ultima* series, and combines it with the first-person, turn-based battles of *Wizardry*.

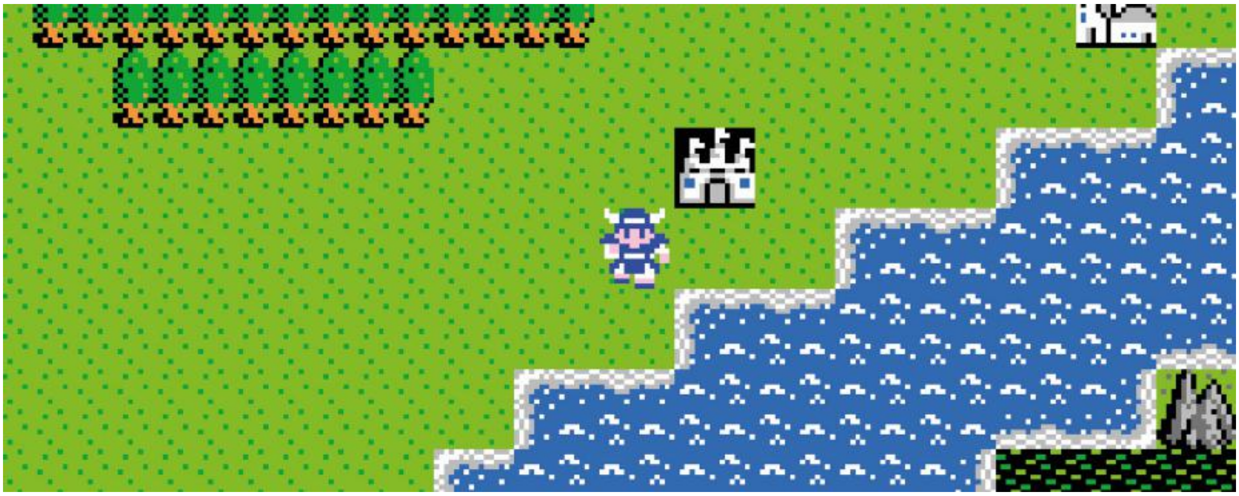
At the helm of the series was Yuji Horii, a writer and game designer at Enix. After joining the company in 1983, he created the text adventure mystery *Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken* ("The Portopia Serial Murders"). A sequel to this game, *Karuizawa Yukai Annai* ("The Karuizawa Kidnapping Files"), had a chapter with an RPG-style segment, including overhead exploration, à la *Ultima*, and some simple turn-based battle sequences. This in turn paved the way for the first *Dragon Quest*, released for the Famicom in 1986. It featured package artwork and character designs by Akira Toriyama, an extremely popular manga artist known at the time for works like *Dr. Slump* and *Dragon Ball*, whose imaginative monster designs and sense of humour were often blended within the games. The music was by Koichi Sugiyama, a classically trained composer who had worked on previous PC games for Enix. The initial *Dragon Quest* games were developed by Chunsoft, helmed by Koichi Nakamura, a friend of Horii's. The release was successful, though not immediately – sales eventually picked up over months, leading to a second game. By the time the third game was released in 1988, *Dragon Quest* had become a Japanese social phenomenon.

Compared to other long-running Japanese RPG series, like *Final Fantasy* and *Megami Tensei*, *Dragon Quest* mostly stays faithful to its roots. All of the games take place in similarly themed worlds, based loosely on medieval Europe. The Toriyama art is mostly the same, and while the main characters are different in each entry, all of the games contain NPCs based on designs going all the way back to the first. Though the stories are largely disconnected, there are recurring themes, including references to the ancient Zenithian civilisation, or the Yggdrasil world tree. The plots are fairly typical "save the world from evil" ones, low-key compared to some of the wilder JRPG stories out there, but are enriched by the episodic style of storytelling, in which the heroes explore, investigate local tragedies, and solve problems. However, the individual games do experiment a bit in both storytelling and character development. The turn-based battle system hasn't changed drastically since the Famicom games, and many NES chiptune sound effects are still used in HD games. This permanence has given the series a nostalgic, comfort-food feel, allowing older players to reminisce about the games of their youth.

The series was less successful outside Japan, though not for lack of trying. The first game made it to North America in mid-1989, nearly three years after its Japanese release. It was renamed *Dragon Warrior*, to avoid copyright conflicts with SPI's pen-and-paper RPG *DragonQuest*. It was accompanied by an advertising blitz in *Nintendo Power* magazine, including strategy guides showing how to beat the game. None of the Akira Toriyama art was featured, as he was unknown in the USA at the time, but instead, lavish Western fantasy-style illustrations by Katsuya Terada were used. Alas, it wasn't quite the success that Enix or Nintendo had expected, and excess stock was given away as a bonus with subscriptions to the magazine. The remaining Famicom games were eventually translated into English, but were largely ignored; assorted remakes and spinoffs were released for the Game Boy Color, while the seventh entry for the PlayStation looked dated compared to Square's flashier *Final Fantasy* series.

With the eighth entry, Square Enix sought to push the series harder outside of Japan, reclaiming the *Dragon Quest* name, and finally releasing the games in Europe. These had lavish English language localisations, filled with accents, puns and other wordplay that make them delightfully distinctive. While the series will probably never be as successful internationally as it is in Japan, it has carved out a large enough fanbase, who appreciate its more low-key qualities.

***Dragon Quest* established many of the JRPG mechanics and tropes that we know today.**



Dragon Quest

Developer: Enix/Chunsoft | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): NES, MSX, SFC, GBC, IOS, AND, PS4, NSW

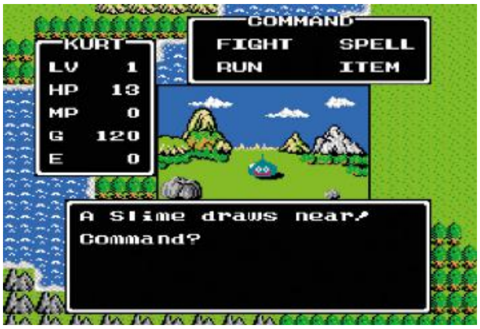
In *Dragon Quest* (or *Dragon Warrior,* in the original American version), you control a young man, descendent of the legendary hero Erdrick (Loto, in Japan). Your goal is to explore the kingdom of Alefgard, rescue the Princess Gwaelin, find all of Erdrick's old equipment, and then defeat the evil Dragonlord.

Going back to this game, decades after its release and after nearly a dozen sequels, *Dragon Quest* naturally feels very quaint. There are only seven weapons, seven pieces of armour, and ten spells. The maximum level you can obtain is 30; the maximum HP probably won't be much more than 200. Battles are one-on-one, and since the only offensive moves are attacking or casting one of two spells, there's not much strategy beyond overpowering your opponents. So you pretty much just grind for more gold and experience, and buy new stuff, allowing you to cross bridges and get to parts of the world with strong enemies, and thus the cycle starts anew. Some elements have long been removed from the series, like the need for torches to explore dungeons, or the rare keys that open locked doors. There's only a single save point – the king, at Tantegel Castle – so you'll often have to retread quite a bit of ground when you die or reload a game.

There are still some nice touches that make the game worth remembering – once you leave the starting castle, you can actually see the Dragonlord's own fortress sitting right across the lake (if only your hero could swim!) Rescuing the Princess is not, in fact, the final goal, as you find her midway through the game. And once you beat the dragon holding her hostage, you get the honour of carrying her back to her father. There are also a few cursed items; if you foolishly wear one, you will be unable to enter the castle unless you've found the way to uncurse it. And when you meet the Dragonlord, he'll make you an offer and ask you to join him in ruling. Obviously, it's a trick, and if you agree, you'll take a "long rest", essentially soft-locking the system and requiring that you reset if you want to start over.

There have been many subsequent ports, and other than tweaking the stats to reduce the difficulty and quantity of grinding, not much has really been added or changed. That's for the best, because while it's pretty simple, there's a straightforward, addictive quality to the progression, and it's easy to see how the game caught on with the Japanese audience.

It never quite had the same effect in other territories though, perhaps because they had trouble marketing it. It wasn't for lack of trying – it was granted some nice features in *Nintendo Power* magazine, even before they gave it away for free – but without a celebrity comic-book artist to help sell it, it's understandable that it floundered outside of Japan. The US version did benefit from a slightly improved interface and better sprites, as well as replacing the password system with a battery backup, but it still felt kind of dated.

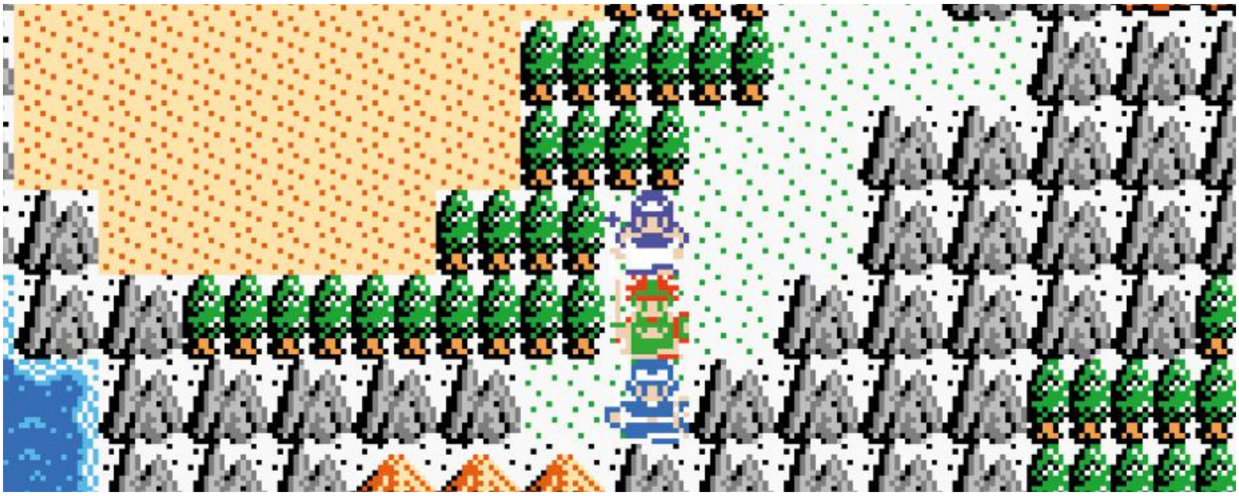


KURT
LV 1
HP 13
MP 0
G 120
E 0

COMMAND
FIGHT SPELL
RUN ITEM

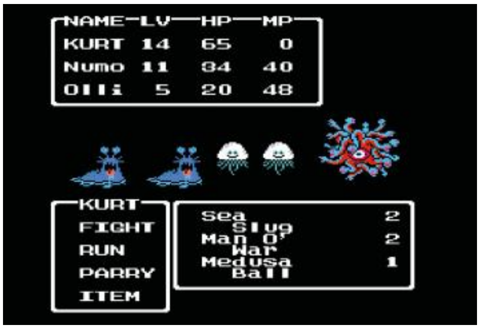
A Slime draws near!
Command?

One of the first enemies you meet is the goofy slime. This creature eventually became the mascot of the *Dragon Quest* franchise, and even starred in a few spinoffs.



Dragon Quest II

Developer: Enix/Chunsoft | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): NES, MSX, SFC, GBC, IOS, AND, PS4, NSW



```
NAME LV  HP  MP
KURT 14  65   0
Numo 11  34  40
Olli  5  20  48

KURT       Sea            2
FIGHT        Slug
RUN        Man O'         2
PARRY        War
ITEM       Medusa         1
             Ball
```

Over the years, as the *Dragon Quest* series exploded in popularity, it gained a reputation as an RPG anyone could play, the games' moderate difficulty level enabling casual RPG players to enjoy them. That absolutely does not apply to *Dragon Quest II*, which is widely acknowledged as being one of the most brutal 8-bit RPGs of the era. Like many sequels, it presumes that you mastered the original, and therefore wanted something significantly more advanced.

In that way, *Dragon Quest II* really hits the mark. There are now three playable characters – at first you just control the Prince of Midenhall, a stout warrior, before you eventually recruit the Prince of Cannock and the Princess of Moonbrooke, both adept with magic but with fairly weak defence. You can now fight multiple enemies at once, though the trade-off here is that battles are fought against plain blackness, instead of the backgrounds from the first game. It is a little unusual in that if there are multiple enemies of the same type, they tend to be grouped together – you cannot attack specific enemies, only target a group, so your character may attack a different enemy each time. The number of weapons and spells has greatly expanded, plus there's a defensive Parry option.

The game world has expanded enough that it necessitates multiple castles, each acting as an independent save point. In fact, the entire kingdom of Alefgard, as it appears in *Dragon Warrior II*, is an island. Although it's significantly smaller than in the original game, the basic layout is the same, and you get to revisit a few old locations. This includes the Dragonlord's castle, where you can find the evil lord's descendent, who actually helps you out this time around. The dungeons are now quite a bit more advanced and actually look distinct, compared to the old bland red brick ones. The torches have been ditched, and you can now see your immediate surroundings when exploring caves. There are several towers where you can fall down pits or jump off edges, tossing you down to lower floors. You can also find lottery tickets, which will let you play games of chance in certain towns, and are the first of many implementations of gambling found in the *Dragon Quest* series.

It's a pretty brutal game, as you finally make your way to the end to beat the evil Hargon, only to have to defeat an even stronger monster, the demon Malroth. As with many subsequent ports, the difficulty level has been lowered (and the graphics improved to bring back the battle backgrounds, in the case of the Super Famicom and mobile versions), if you don't really have the patience for it. Since the first *Dragon Quest* is so short, it's often bundled together with this sequel in the same package. As with its predecessor, the American NES version has a battery backup save, plus some minor tweaks, including a new introductory sequence that shows the destruction of the castle of Moonbrooke.

***Dragon Quest II* is a typical RPG sequel. More characters! More monsters! Longer quest!**

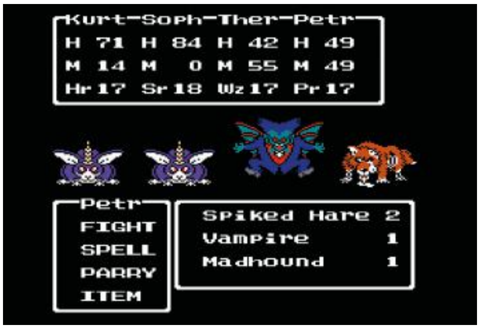
Dragon Quest III

Developer: Enix/Chunsoft | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): NES, SFC, GBC, IOS, AND, PS4, NSW

The first two *Dragon Quest* games were very popular in Japan, but it's the third game that really cemented the series' reputation as a national phenomenon. Even in the United States gaming media, rumours circulated that lines to purchase the game were obscenely long, and Japan had passed a law mandating that the games could only be released on weekends, since folks were skipping both school and work to buy it (this was actually just a suggestion, rather than an actual law).

Dragon Quest III: Soshite Densetsu e ("And So, Into the Legend") establishes many of the tropes for not only this series but many other JRPGs. For every game that begins with the hero's mother waking them up from bed, or every game where the characters explore a ghost ship, you can point to *Dragon Quest III*. The protagonist (male or female) has the Hero character class, and sets off to find out what happened to their warrior father, Ortega. However, you can create a whole roster of companions by visiting Patty/Luida's Bar. There are standard classes like the Fighter and Soldier (both physical warriors), the Pilgrim/Healer, and the Wizard/Mage. More unusual classes include the Merchant/Dealer (who gets extra money after battles and appraises items) and the Goof-Off/Jester, who is almost useless but has a high luck skill. There's also a powerful Sage class, to which you can promote units, provided you've found the right item. You can multi-class by visiting a shrine after reaching level 20 – characters restart at level 1 in the new class, but keep all of the skills they had in their previous class. Created characters can be male or female too (the guy Goof-Off is a clown while the lady is a bunny girl). The number of player combatants has also expanded to four.

Day and night cycle, as time passes, which affects events in town as well as the monsters you face. Seeds are items which can be given to any character to increase their strength, HP, or other statistics. One town has a monster arena, where you can bet on the outcomes of fights. The world map is roughly based on Earth – the pyramids of Isis are located where Egypt would be, the town of Romoly is in Italy, Portoga is in Portugal, and Edinbear is on an isle analogous to Great Britain. And in contrast to *Final Fantasy*'s airships, you control a gigantic bird to soar over the map.



Kurt–Soph–Ther–Petr
H 71 H 84 H 42 H 49
M 14 M 0 M 55 M 49
Hr17 Sr18 Wz17 Pr17

Petr
FIGHT
SPELL
PARRY
ITEM

Spiked Hare 2
Vampire 1
Madhound 1

***Dragon Quest III* is one of the most beloved RPGs in Japan, firmly establishing the formula for scores of other games.**

The biggest twist, though, is after you defeat the evil Baramos, purported to be the game's big bad. But instead of victory, you're tossed into the World of Darkness, which is actually Alefgard from the first *Dragon Quest*. This reveals that the game is actually a prequel, and the protagonist is the Erdrick of legend, in whose footsteps the hero of the first game would tread.

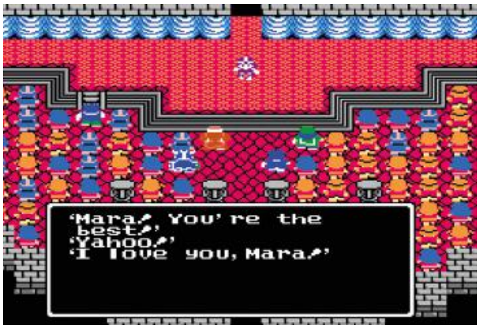
Later ports to the Super Famicom, Game Boy Color, and mobile platforms add plenty of enhancements, including a quiz to determine the stats of the hero and a new Thief class. Most of these were released in English, except the SFC port; the smartphone release gave the English the subtitle *The Seeds of Salvation*.

Dragon Quest IV

Developer: Enix/Chunsoft | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): NES, PS1, DS, IOS, AND

Dragon Quest IV: Michibikareshi Monotachi ("The Chosen Ones", also subtitled *Chapters of the Chosen* for the English DS remake) flexes the series' storytelling muscles more than the prior releases. As with the third game, you name the hero and pick their gender, but the focus isn't on them … at least, not initially. Instead, you're introduced to all of the supporting characters, each starring in their own chapter. In the first, the knight Ragnar must investigate the nearby tower to uncover the mystery behind some missing children; in the second, princess Alena escapes the boring drudgery of her castle life and explores her kingdom, joined by two castle guards meant to protect her. The third is the most unique, as you control Torneko (a.k.a. Taloon) the merchant, who balances his time between running a store, selling to and buying from local adventurers, and scavenging the land for more stuff to sell. The fourth stars two sisters, Meena and Maya, one a dancer and the other a fortune teller, as they hunt down their father's murderer. And the hero finally becomes the star in the final chapter, as all of the supporting cast come together, discover how all of the stories are linked, and defeat the bad guy at the centre of it all.

The game hasn't really changed all that much compared to its predecessor, and since there's no way to create characters, it actually feels a little thinner. But considering that your party members have actual personality now, it's a reasonable trade-off. Since there is a total of eight party members in the final chapter, the caravan is introduced to allow you to swap between active combatants, though it can't be taken into areas like caves. A few other long-time *Dragon Quest* traditions have been introduced here, including the presence of a casino, where you can gamble your money in hopes of winning the jackpot, and a sub-quest to hunt for numerous hidden medals, which can be presented to the Medal King for exclusive bonuses.



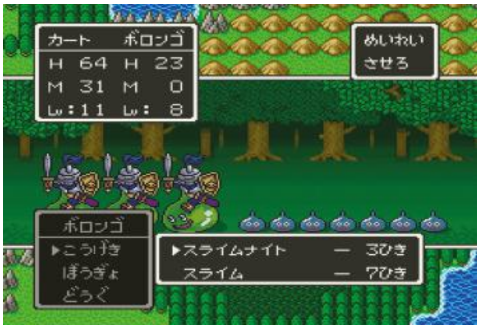
'Mara! You're the best!'
'Yahoo!'
'I love you, Mara!'

Dragon Quest IV was later remade for the PlayStation 2, using the 2D sprites on 3D backgrounds style of the seventh game. This was then used as the basis for the Nintendo DS and smartphone versions, which were translated into English. (Oddly, the English DS version excises the party talk function found in other versions of the remake, in which the characters would discuss the current events. This was reinstated for the smartphone release.) Beyond the aesthetic improvements, the remake also fixes one of the biggest issues of the original game: in the last chapter, you could only control the hero in combat, with the AI taking over all of the other combatants, but now you can direct everyone. There's also a brief chapter in which you play as the hero in their hometown, plus an extra chapter at the end starring Psaro, one of the main villains. Other quality-of-life improvements from later games appear here too, as well as the return of the Immigrant Town sub-quest from *Dragon Quest VII.*

***Dragon Quest IV* expands its narrative skills with a diverse cast of characters, and is one of the few games in the series in which you can pick the gender of the protagonist.**

Dragon Quest V

Developer: Enix/Chunsoft/ArtePiazza | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): SFC, PS2, DS



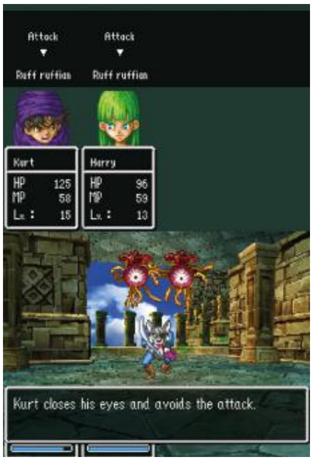
In *Dragon Quest V: Hand of the Heavenly Bride*, the hero starts as a young child, accompanying his father Pankraz (Pappas in Japanese), the king of the land, on an adventure. As a kid, he is unable to fight a pack of slimes without his father's help, and goes on crazy adventures before even learning to read. Everything is flipped on its head when the hero's father is murdered before his eyes, and he is sold into slavery. Ten years pass, and as an adult, the hero escapes, and following in his father's footsteps, seeks the legendary Zenithian hero who could save the kingdom. In the process, he gets married, and has children of his own. But then misfortune returns: he is turned into stone. More time passes, and his offspring, now little warriors in their own right, rescue him from the curse. Finally, the whole family assembles to find the hero who can enter the demon world and save the world from chaos.

Dragon Quest V is the JRPG equivalent of an epic poem, detailing the story of three generations of heroes. SEGA's *Phantasy Star III* for the Genesis tried something similar around the same time, but *Dragon Quest V* is a much more personal story, and also happens to be a far stronger game overall.

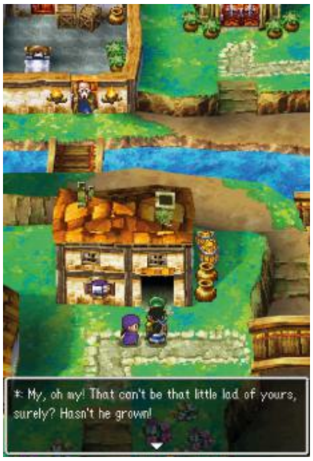
One of the main reasons for this is the emphasis not only on family, but on courtship. The biggest decisions are about which of the game's heroines to make your wife. Bianca is a blond woman with an adventurous spirit, while blue-haired Nera (Flora in Japanese) is a more traditional lady, being the daughter of a wealthy businessman. The DS remake adds a third potential partner, raven-haired Deborah, who is Nera's older sister and a typical tsundere, who treats the hero as something more like a servant than a husband. Your wife has her own individual stats, and she determines the hair colour of your children. This choice was a hallmark among Japanese RPG players at the time, though the SFC version obviously wants you to pick Bianca, given that you go on some fun childhood adventures with her in a spooky castle early on, and she appears on the game's cover. Conversely, Nera isn't even mentioned in the manual. Later versions try to balance out the characters a little better.

This scenario is one of the reasons why *Dragon Quest V* is so beloved in Japan, though its influence goes far beyond the romantic choices. The hero is unique because he's not a strong warrior, like past *DQ* protagonists, but rather a monster tamer. *Dragon Quest IV* established, in its first chapter, with the healslime that joins up with Ragnar, that monsters can actually be friendly and work alongside humans. One of the first creatures you recruit is Saber (named Borongo in Japanese), a young sabretooth cat, who later rejoins the hero when they are both fully grown ... after you tame him, anyway. Once the hero gets the proper ability, there's a random chance after a battle that a wounded monster will switch sides and join him. While not every monster is friendly, there are 40 potential recruits, which makes for a large

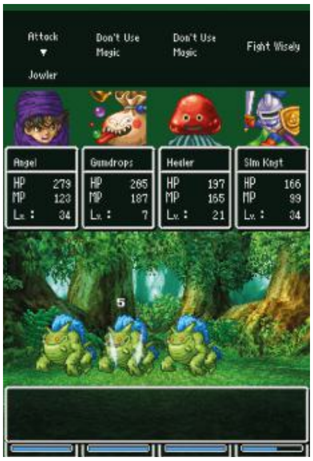
***Dragon Quest V* purports to let the player choose between tomboy Bianca and the more ladylike Nera ... but Bianca is more prominently featured everywhere, so she feels like the choice the developers intended.**



Kurt closes his eyes and avoids the attack.



✻: My, oh my! That can't be that little lad of yours, surely? Hasn't he grown!



NINTENDO DS
Dragon Quest V

number of player characters when put alongside the humans. Only three can battle at a time in the initial Super Famicom version, though this is expanded to four in later versions.

Indeed, the Super Famicom version is pretty basic. It's more colourful than its 8-bit predecessors, and it now includes appropriate backgrounds for combat, but it still looks and feels like the NES game. And while the soundtrack benefits from the Super Famicom sound chip, it's not nearly as strong as some of the better games around at this early point in the system's life, like *ActRaiser* or *Final Fantasy IV*. Unfortunately, Enix was much more selective about the games that were localised for the Super Nintendo, and decided not to release this version outside of Japan.

A remake was released for the PlayStation 2 in 2004, which redid all of the visuals in 3D. They're pretty basic though, and compare poorly to those in the gorgeous *Dragon Quest VIII*, released less than a year later. On the plus side, it's the first *Dragon Quest* game to have a fully orchestrated soundtrack within the game itself, and has several extra recruitable monsters. A later remake for the DS uses the same engine as *DQVII* (and the earlier remake of *DQIV*), with 2D sprites on 3D backgrounds. The music can't really compare here, but otherwise it's an arguable step above the cheap-looking PS2 version. It does inherit that release's improvements, in addition to adding Deborah as a potential wife. This version was released in English and other languages, making it the ideal way for international gamers to experience this legendary title.

While *Dragon Quest III* is the game Japanese gamers are most nostalgic about, *Dragon Quest V* is the best one. Its characters and story are so strong that they were used as the basis for the 2019 CGI film, subtitled *Your Story*. As is to be expected for a 20+ hour RPG whittled down to a sub-two hour movie, some things are glazed over and removed. The most egregious example is that the childhood segment has maybe five minutes of screentime, so little that the relationships don't make sense unless you've played the games. A controversial ending has resulted in this film getting a divided response, but its themes will resonate deeply with anyone who spent childhood summers playing RPGs.

Released in 2008, the DS remake of *Dragon Quest V* was the first time the game had been available in English.

***Dragon Quest: Your Story* offers respect to video games for their power and the joys they can bring. It's meant for Japanese fans nostalgic for the Super Famicom game, but its themes are universal.**

Dragon Quest VI

Developer: Enix/Chunsoft | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC, DS, IOS, AND

Dragon Quest VI: Realms of Revelation (*Maboroshi no Daichi* or "The Phantom World" in Japan) features a "dual world" setup, being broken up into the "real world" and the "dream world". The story begins with a trio of young warriors mounting an assault on the evil warlord Murdaw. However, you and your party prove no match for his power, and all of you are banished into thin air. Then, you awaken back in your room, your confrontation apparently having been just a dream. Upon resuming your daily routine, you find a strange gaping hole in the earth, which leads to another world almost exactly like your own. However, you appear only as a spectre, and most people can't see or interact with you. Eventually you come across the companions from your dream (who've lost their memories, of course), before eventually figuring out a way to jump between the worlds.

Then you learn the truth about these two dimensions – the opening segment wasn't really a dream, but rather took place in the real world: Murdaw has banished you to the dream world. The rest of the inhabitants of the real world have projected their minds into this dream world, leading to some interesting connections – for example, one guard in the real world hates his name, and his identical version in the dream world has the name he wishes he had. You'll do a lot of jumping back and forth between the two worlds, uncovering the hopes and dreams of the townspeople and fixing their problems.

Dragon Quest VI tries to balance the unique personalities of the previous two games with the character-building of the third game by implementing a class system. At a certain point in the game, when you visit Alltrades Abbey, you can assign a job to any party member, allowing them to train, which gives them permanent skills. Later on, switching the class of this character lets you obtain new skills for them. Unlike *Final Fantasy V* Jobs, these skills can be used at any time, so there's no need to swap abilities. The starting classes are mostly the same as *DQIII* (plus a Monster Mauler class that lets you capture monsters as the *DQV* hero does), and there are more-powerful hybrid classes when you've reached certain ranks. It's a cool way to customise your characters, but it does require a lot more grinding to get the skills you want. It's also a huge game, much larger than any of the entries before it. There are two large overworlds, plus the ability to explore underwater, as well as the demon world near the end of the game. It's also much more open-ended – at a certain point, the game opens up and you can do anything in almost any order.

Only the DS version was released in English, and while that's stylistically the same as the previous two DS ports, the SFC version had its own unique aesthetics, especially with the bassy sound orchestration. With that uniqueness removed, it disappointingly looks and feels like every other *DQ* game from the era.

めいれい
させろ
カート バッサン
H 34 H 27
M 22 M 0
どく どく
▶たたかう
いれかえ
さくせん
にげる
ハエまどう 3匹

DRAGON QUEST VI

While earlier *Dragon Quest* games were hardly lookers, the sixth entry has some brilliant sprite work, and shows the fantasy artwork of Akira Toriyama at the top of his game.

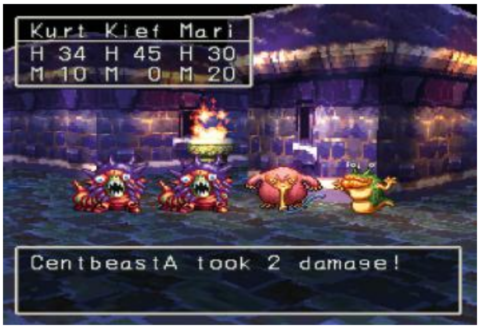
Dragon Quest VII

Developer: Enix/Heartbeat/ArtePiazza | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS1, 3DS, AND, IOS

At the outset of *Dragon Quest VII: Fragments of the Forgotten Past* (*Eden no Senshitachi*, or "Warriors of Eden" in Japan), the world is a lonely place, consisting of one single island, alone in a sprawling ocean. However, when exploring some nearby ruins, three young adventurers end up time-travelling to the past and discover new isles. At some point in history, each of these islands succumbed to its own mini-cataclysm – saving these lands in the past makes them appear in the present. During your adventures, you'll travel between the two time periods, slowly repopulate the world, and clash against the evil that caused these disasters in the first place.

Dragon Quest VII was a latecomer to the PlayStation generation, and from a technical standpoint, it looked somewhat dated – it uses 2D sprites over 3D backgrounds, though the enemy battle animations are still static. Even the music sounds weak compared to what Square was producing at the time. At least all this allows for extremely quick loading times.

Still, what it lacks in visual gusto, it makes up for in content, as it's an incredibly long game, with the average playtime clocking in at over 100 hours. The vignettes are arguably the strongest in the *Dragon Quest* series, too, in equal parts comic and tragic. In one village, the humans have turned into animals, and vice versa. Once you set everything right, you can revisit them in the present to see their festival, in which they wear animal costumes. In another, you find a lonely inventor who creates a robot who will live by his side forever. Back in the present, you find the mechanical creation tending to its master's bones, unaware that he's long dead. Along with this, there's also an extra sub-quest in which you populate a deserted island with various villagers, sort of like the castle building in the *Suikoden* games. However, the types of people you collect will in turn affect the town.



Kurt Kief Mari
H 34 H 45 H 30
M 10 M 0 M 20

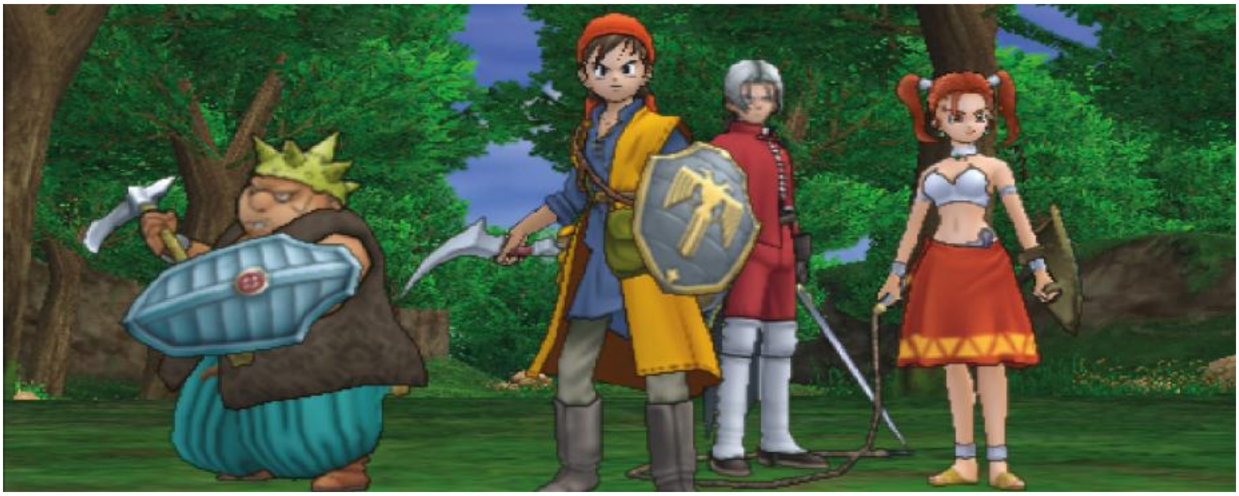
CentbeastA took 2 damage!

The major issue with a game this size is its glacial pacing. The opening segment, in which you explore the nearby ruins and uncover magical shards, is dreadfully long, especially in the PS1 version. In between the vignettes, you need to search for more shards to open up new locales, but this involves scrounging around in the same areas in past and present, and they often look identical, in spite of the lengthy period of time between them. (It certainly doesn't have the wide variation of eras seen in *Chrono Trigger*.) The game inherits the job training system from *Dragon Quest VI* but with even more jobs, to the point where there are just too many. Only those who really have the time and patience to devote to it will be able to see it to the end.

The 2013 3DS remake includes 3D graphics and a vastly improved localisation, plus it tunes things up by streamlining some segments, replacing random battles with visible encounters, and giving you a radar to more easily find those shards, though it's still a slog at points.

PlayStation
DRAGON WARRIOR
VII

***Dragon Quest* was a constant latecomer in North America, where the seventh entry had to compete against *Final Fantasy X* for the PlayStation 2 after only a few months, making it seem incredibly dated.**

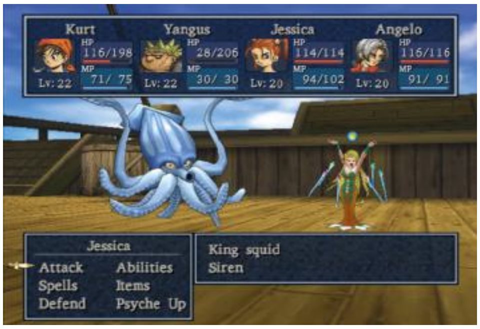


Dragon Quest VIII

Developer: Square Enix/Level-5 | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): PS2, 3DS, IOS, AND

Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King (*Sora to Umi to Daichi to Norowareshi Himegimi* or "The Cursed Princess of the Sky, Sea and Earth") is a monumental step forward from its predecessor in presentation. Development was passed to Level-5, a company known for the stunning cel-shaded artwork in *Dark Cloud 2* and *Rogue Galaxy*, and the result looks like a real-time 3D rendered version of an Akira Toriyama cartoon. The improvement goes beyond just the visuals, as the size of the overworld is also greatly expanded, offering a sprawling land and cavernous dungeons to explore. Such things have been commonplace since the beginning, but everything now looks and feels fresh.

However, some other areas have been scaled back. The storyline is a little simple compared to the high concepts of the past few games – the King, Trode, and his daughter have been transformed into a ghoul and a horse, respectively, so the hero sets off on an adventure to help him, which involves trailing an evil jester magician named Dhoulmagus. There are only four party members, including the hero, but they're a memorable bunch. The whip-wielding, wayward princess Jessica, with her pigtails and enormous bosom, seems designed to please male gamers, but the real star of the game is Yangus, a stubby thief with a heart of gold. However, there's no sort of class system. Instead, whenever you level up, you're assigned some extra points that you can allocate to certain character-specific attributes. New to the battle system is the Tension gauge, which lets you use a turn (or more) to build up strength, *Dragon Ball Z*-style, and focus on increasingly powerful attacks. The camera in the battle system is more dynamic, focusing on character attacks rather than purely viewing from a first-person perspective, so combat looks and feels more engaging than before.



Where *Dragon Quest VIII* feels at odds with itself, at least in the initial PlayStation 2 release, is that it's visually so hugely advanced, but remains rather conservative in other ways. Random battles are a constant, and both the added attack animations and the lengthier load times mean they take much longer than before. Even the dungeons feel drawn out, just because of the larger scale of the environments. At least the story doesn't quite drag as much as in *DQVII*.

This game signalled the international re-launch of the series. The English language localisers went the extra mile, adding an orchestral soundtrack and full voice acting. Both the European accents and the delightfully goofy puns set the tone for subsequent English releases.

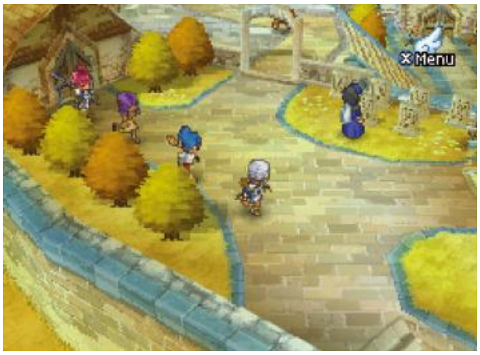
The 2015 3DS version isn't a full-on remake like *Dragon Quest VII* was, but it does make some key changes – random battles are gone, fights can be sped up, and two minor characters, Morrie and Red, are now playable. The graphics are downgraded, but otherwise this is the definitive version. Sadly, the English version loses the orchestral music due to some bizarre licensing rights issue with the composer.

PlayStation 2
Dragon Quest
VIII

This is the first game in the series to use the *Dragon Quest* (rather than *Dragon Warrior*) name outside of Japan, as Square Enix had seemingly worked out any copyright issues. It was also the first game in the series to be released in Europe.

Dragon Quest IX

Developer: Square Enix/Level-5 | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): DS



NINTENDO DS
DRAGON QUEST
Sentinels of the Starry Skies

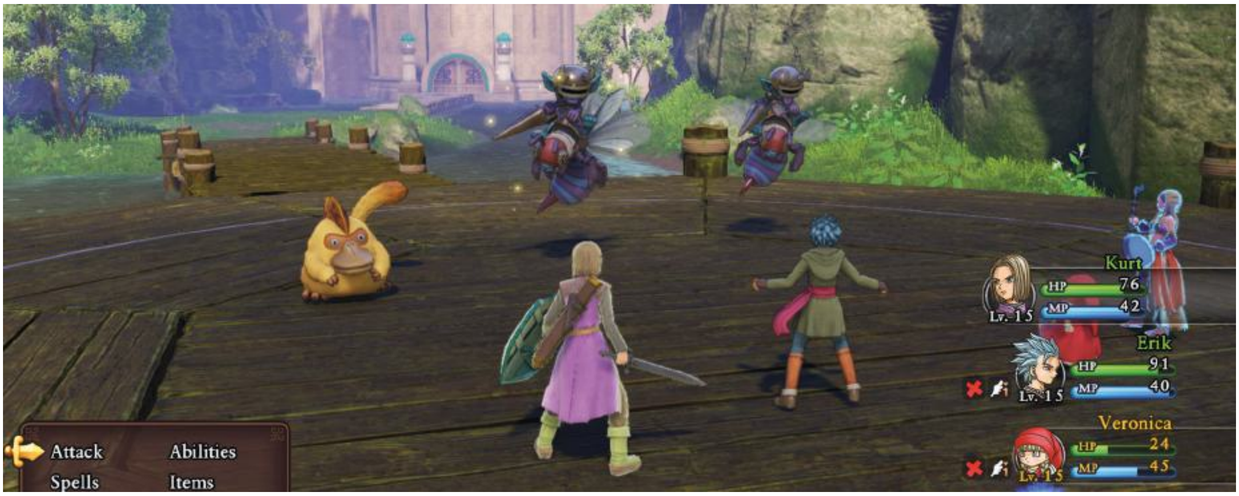
In *Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels of the Starry Skies*, (*Hoshizora no Mamoribito* or "Protectors of the Starry Sky") you play as a Celestrian, one of a race of angels who lives in a castle in the sky called the Observatory. At first, you are assigned as a guardian to a village on Earth down below, doing good deeds and obtaining a force called Benevolessence, which you then give to the world tree Yggdrasil in hopes that you will enter the Realm of the Almighty. Unfortunately, the Observatory gets attacked by a mysterious force, and you fall to the world below, causing you to become mortal. Now acting as the world's protector, you set off a journey to find out what happened, and are caught up in a battle of the heavens.

Due to the immense popularity of the Nintendo DS in Japan, this mainline *Dragon Quest* went portable there. Obviously, from a technological standpoint, that means it's a huge step back from its predecessor. The visuals are substantially downgraded (though they look decent considering the system), and both the voices and the orchestral music are gone. It is different from the DS remakes, in that most of the characters are 3D rendered, as opposed to 2D sprites, so both the cutscenes and the battle segments are more dynamic. The battle system is similar to that in *Dragon Quest VIII*, including both Tension, and Skill distribution, plus combos that grant increasing damage multipliers. The game also takes its biggest inspiration from *Dragon Quest III*. The party is completely customisable, initially offering a choice of six character classes (more advanced ones come later). Characters can switch classes, though their level is tied to each class, and skills don't cross over between them.

There's also a character creator that lets you pick gender, hair colour, face, body frame, and more. Equipment is reflected on your character as well, giving every player's party a unique look. This ties in with the multiplayer elements: other people can join you using the system's local wireless capabilities. You can also use the Tag Mode to communicate with other nearby players and get new quests or items, a concept that was implemented on a system-wide scale with the Streetpass functionality of the 3DS. There are tons of quests to find and complete, this being the game's focus, considering the relatively short length of the story mode. However, since the Nintendo WiFi connection has long been shut down, and almost no one is running around with DS systems and *Dragon Quest IX* in their pocket, much of this is meaningless now, leaving unofficial servers the only way to unlock much of the optional content.

The story is okay, but it lacks the storytelling hooks and the memorable characters of previous games. The only personality, through much of the adventure, is Stella, a ganguro gal Celestrian, who feels a little out of place. Overall, as a modern multiplayer iteration of *Dragon Quest III*, this is a great experiment, but ultimately there's really not much memorable about it.

In the United States, *Dragon Quest IX* was marketed with a commercial featuring actor Seth Green, which may have contributed it to becoming substantially more successful than previous games, selling over a million units between North America and Europe.



Dragon Quest XI

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2017 | Platform(s): PS4, WIN, NSW, 3DS

In *Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age*, the young hero learns that he is the Luminary, the reincarnation of the chosen hero who defeated evil long ago. However, for reasons that aren't initially clear, the king of Heliodor views him as a threat, sees him as the Darkspawn, and calls for his imprisonment. After escaping, he begins his journey to reach Yggdrasil, the World Tree, to understand his true destiny.

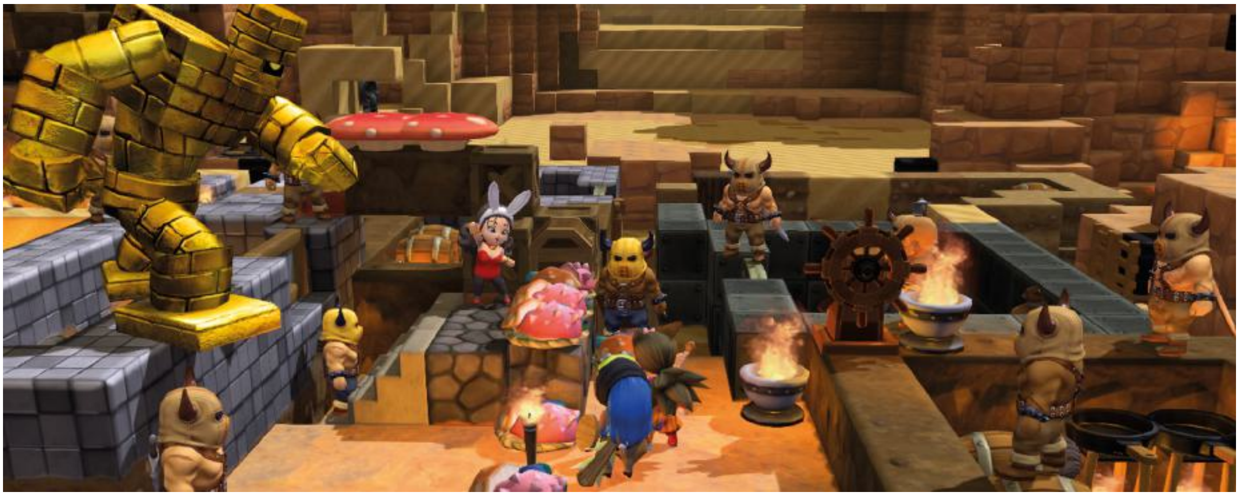
After the diversions of the previous two games, this one feels like a true follow-up to *Dragon Quest VIII*, now rendered in high resolution. The cel-shading is more subtle than before and the colours aren't quite as bright, but it's still a splendid-looking game, and the enemy animations are especially endearing. It shifts the combat to a third-person perspective and adds some quality-of-life elements from the more modern games, including visible encounters, speedier combat, and the ability to run (and even jump). Fights work a little differently, in that the character's actions are timed based on the speed stat, rather than each side taking turns. New to this game is the Pep system, in which an invisible counter will increase as characters take damage, and eventually send them into a heightened state that makes them stronger and lets them perform special attacks, sometimes in tandem with other characters. While this feels a little random, since you can't pre-determine when it'll happen, it carries over for several turns (and even between battles), so you need to use it strategically when it does trigger. The customisation system is similar to *DQVIII*'s too, though it's displayed on a grid and you have a little more room in determining character growth paths.

The characters shine here, including Veronica and Serena, twin sisters reminiscent of Meena and Maya from *DQIV*, except one of them has been cursed with the form of a (rather sassy) child, and Jade and Rab, a young woman and an old man who are exiled royalty and who play off each other in amusing ways. But the breakout character is Sylvando, a flamboyant entertainer, who often feels more like a hero than the game's silent protagonist. The story itself is typical *Dragon Quest*, though the three-act structure is probably where players will either fall in love with, or burn out on, the game. The first part introduces the world; the second part sees it after it's been marred with tragedy and destruction. The third (technically an extended epilogue) travels back in time a bit and lets you re-do the second act but with an overall more positive outcome. It is a little long, but it feels more justified than some other drawn-out *Dragon Quest* scenarios.

In Japan, *DQXI* was released simultaneously on the PlayStation 4 and 3DS, the latter being a scaled down version of its HD counterpart, as well as including as a 2D mode that lets you play the entire game as if it were a 16-bit title. The later *Definitive Edition* includes this mode as well, plus other niceties, like an orchestral soundtrack, Japanese voice acting, and some extra character quests. The visuals are only slightly downgraded and the portability on the Switch is a nice feature.

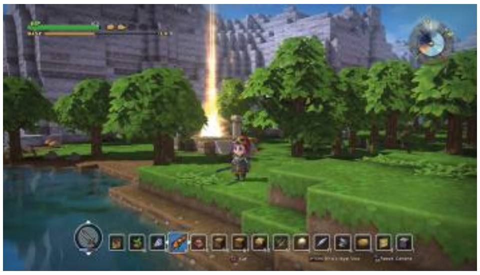
Veronica
What was that? She wiped the floor with you! You should be ashamed of yourself, going out in the first round!

***Dragon Quest XI* is a fine blend of modern and traditional, replacing random battles with enemy encounters and speeding up the battle system, while still keeping the charming characters and scenarios, along with an often hilarious English localisation.**



Dragon Quest Builders (series)

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PS3, PS4, PSV, NSW, WIN

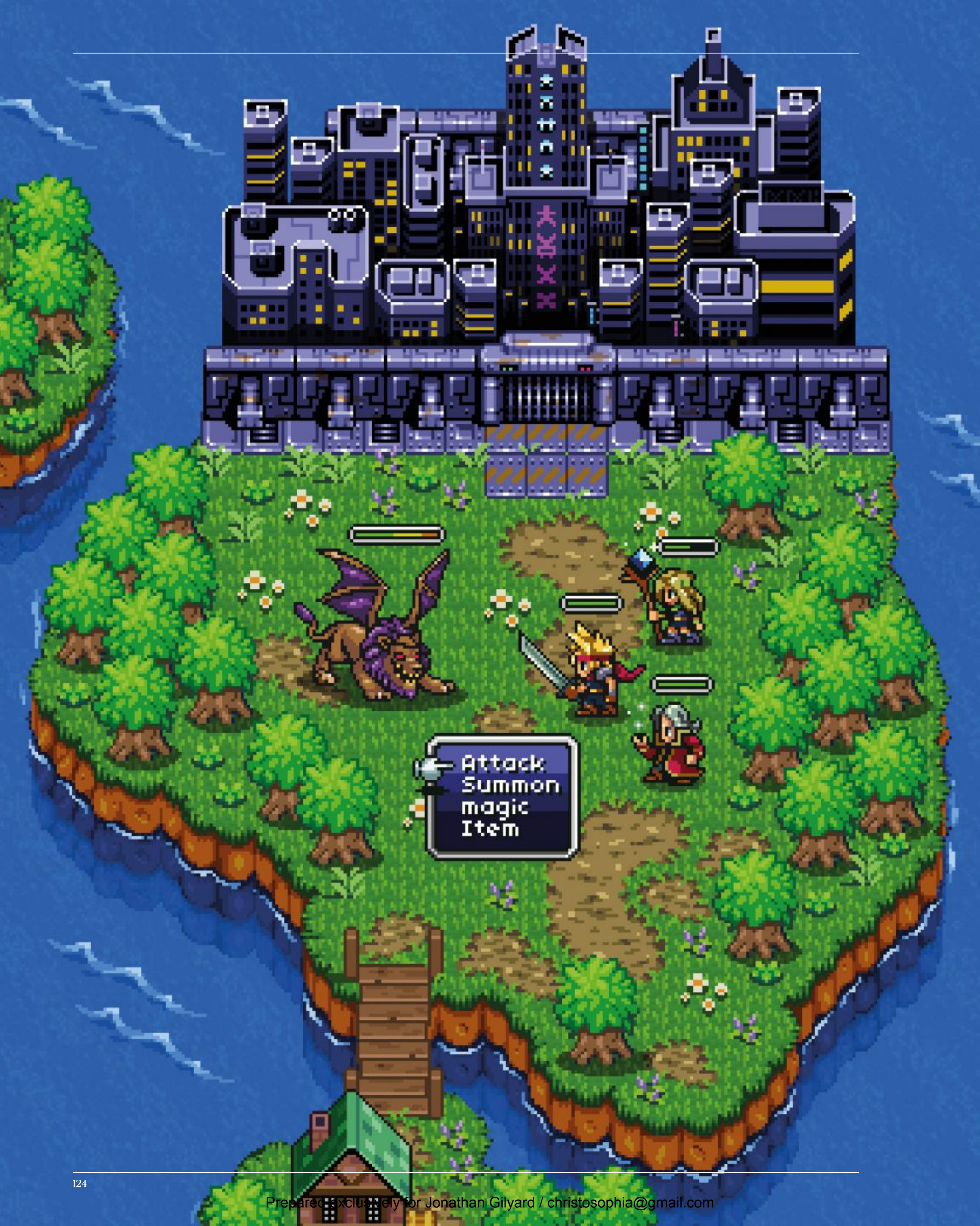


Dragon Quest has had a history of melding itself with other game types to create new and interesting games, such as *Mystery Dungeon (Rogue)* and the *Monsters* series *(Pokémon)*. *Dragon Quest Builders* is basically *Dragon Quest* plus *Minecraft*, a unique take, if ever there was one. You play as the titular Builder, in charge of rebuilding towns, protecting them from monsters, completing quests, and defeating bosses. The entire landscape is built of various square-shaped blocks, and nearly all its elements can be dismantled for materials to build your own structures, while various things can be collected and combined to create new items. As in *Minecraft*, this allows for quite a bit of creativity, while bringing in the *Dragon Quest* touch by giving the game an RPG-like structure, along with other elements from the series – there are familiar monsters, and all of the characters are super-deformed types in the Akira Toriyama style, the package completed by a light-hearted English localisation as usual for the series. Many of the characters have arcs that develop as you build up their towns, and there's a warm sense of community as you build up broken cities from scratch. In some ways, it feels a lot like Quintet's *ActRaiser*, in that you're managing both town creation and adventuring, though it melds the two closer together.

There are two games in the series, both sequels to the original *Dragon Quest* games. Famously, in the first game, the hero could choose whether to join the evil Dragonlord at the end of the game. In the initial *Dragon Quest Builders*, he chose poorly and thus Dragonlord was able to destroy the world, leaving it up to the protagonist, known as the Builder, to return the kingdom of Alefgard to its former glory. *Dragon Quest Builders 2* is a more straightforward sequel, as here an evil cult is attempting to resurrect the nefarious Malroth ... except something goes wrong, and he's reborn as a demon child who doesn't quite realise he's supposed to be evil, so he joins your cause to rebuild the land.

The first game is ambitious but plenty rough around the edges – the landscapes are huge and it takes forever to trudge anywhere, combat is awkward, and essential resources are often hard to find. It can get frustrating when you're running low on food, or need to replace degrading equipment. The sequel acknowledges and fixes most of these aspects: it lets you run and establishes several warp points, Malroth regularly joins the Builder and helps fight monsters, there's an experience system to make combat more meaningful, equipment degradation is gone, and villagers pitch in more to reduce some of the tedious aspects. Plus, in the first game, there were four chapters, and basically everything from items to inventory was reset every time you completed one. The second game maintains some things from chapter to chapter, so it doesn't feel like you're starting again from zero, plus it has a central island that you can build up and populate with characters recruited from other locales. It can become a time sink, but even those who don't normally like *Minecraft* can find this game more purposeful, thanks to the concrete goals.

Given that 8-bit RPG worlds were basically constructed out of tiles, *Dragon Quest Builders* does feel like you're running through greatly expanded 3D versions of the older games, something that's readily apparent when looking at the map screens.


Attack
Summon
magic
Item

Final Fantasy

The Japanese company Square was created in 1983, with their early work being primarily adventure games, though they also helmed DOG, a label that published Famicom Disk System games for other companies. They dabbled in RPGs too, including the elaborate (but tedious) *Cruise Chaser Blassty* and the simple *Cleopatra no Mahou*. One of their big initial efforts was *Seiken Densetsu*, a Famicom Disk System title that would've spanned multiple releases … except it ended up getting cancelled, with a public note requesting that anyone who pre-ordered it please look forward to the company's next RPG, *Final Fantasy*, instead.

Like many Famicom RPGs, *Final Fantasy* owes a large debt to *Dragon Quest*, though it managed to differentiate itself in a number of ways – the graphic style was cleaner, the battle system moved to a side-scrolling perspective that allowed many more enemies on the screen at once, and it wore its *Dungeons and Dragons* influence more openly, featuring some familiar, if plagiarised, monsters and inheriting its Vancian magic system. Coming out just a few months before *Dragon Quest III*, it didn't quite steal its thunder, but it did prove to be a massive success, allowing for two sequels to be developed for the platform.

Final Fantasy was long believed to have gotten its name from director Hironobu Sakaguchi, who had worked on a few other Famicom titles for Square, like *King's Knight* and *3-D WorldRunner*. Since these were not particularly popular, he was planning to leave the game development industry if his next work was not a success – in other words, it was his own "final fantasy". He later noted that this was really only half-true, as the title was primarily chosen because they wanted an alliterative English name, like *Dungeons and Dragons*. Their first choice, "Fighting Fantasy", was already taken up by a British game series, so they went with *Final Fantasy* instead.

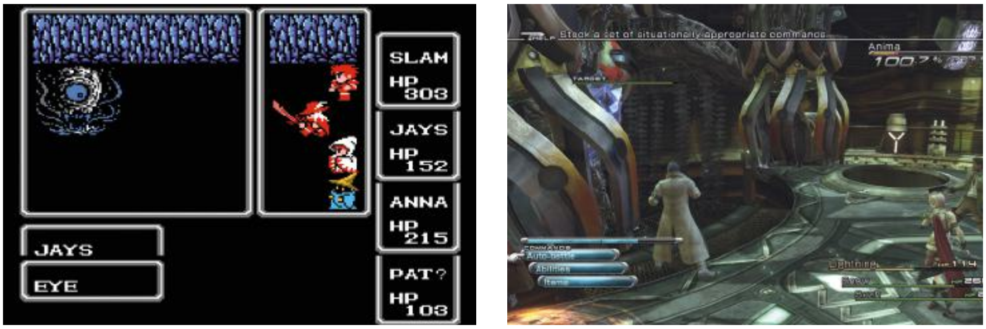
Under Sakaguchi, development was primarily handled by six other staff members – Akitoshi Kawazu, who later went on to helm the quirky *SaGa* series; Hiromichi Tanaka, involved in battle design and scenario writing in many Square products during the 32-bit era, such as *Xenogears* and *Chrono Cross*; Kenji Terada, another writer; Kazuko Shibuya, whose distinctive spritework gave the series its unique identity during the 8- and 16-bit console eras; Nasir Gebelli, the genius Iranian programmer; and Nobuo Uematsu, who eventually became known as one of the best video game musicians of all time. Artist Yoshitaka Amano was chosen to handle the cover artwork, giving the series a slightly more adult, and classier, look than Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Quest*, which was primarily targetted at adolescents.

Later games added more developers to the stable, many of whom went on to work on notable titles within and beyond the series, including Koichi Ishii, who later helmed the *Mana* series; Takashi Tokita, who co-directed *Chrono Trigger* and *Live-A-Live*; Yoshinori Kitase, who took over directorial duties from Sakaguchi after *Final Fantasy V* and helmed the series through to the tenth entry; Tetsuya Nomura, the main character designer for the series from *Final Fantasy VII* onwards, who also directed the *Kingdom Hearts* games; Tetsuya Takahashi, who later founded Monolith Soft and created the *Xenosaga* and *Xenoblade* games; and Kazushige Nojima, a writer who also worked on Data East's *Heracles no Eikou* games; and countless others.

Sakaguchi was the executive producer of the series until *Final Fantasy X*. But he had greater ambitions than just video games, helming the production of *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, a full length computer-generated motion picture. It was an expensive endeavour, and unfortunately, a very costly one for Square, as it lost quite a bit of money. There were a number of reasons – it had little connection to the video game series, and it was aimed primarily towards an older audience, whereas many CG movies were aimed at kids, for example – and it resulted in him leaving the company. He later founded his own production studio, Mistwalker, which worked on a handful of RPGs for the Xbox 360 and Wii, including *Blue Dragon*, *Lost Odyssey*, and *The Last Story*.

Considering the various staff members is important when contrasting this series to *Dragon Quest*. Most of that series was led by (or at least credited to) three key staff members: director Yuji Horii, artist Akira Toriyama, and musician Koichi Sugiyama. These central roles did not really change over the series' life, resulting in a consistency that kept the *Dragon Quest* identity strong. On the other hand, the development of *Final Fantasy* was often passed between various departments and staff, resulting in individual entries that feel quite different from one another.

Spiky hair and big swords may be well worn tropes by now, but were also hugely popularised by *Final Fantasy*.



Compare the battle scenes of the original *Final Fantasy* for the NES and Final *Fantasy XIII* for the PlayStation 3 – they've come a long way!

This isn't to say that each *Final Fantas*y game is totally different from the next – some entries do share the same staff, and there are recognisable common traits between entries. But, despite the advancements in technology, you can look at *Dragon Quest* and *Dragon Quest XI* and see their similarity, while it's hard to see such commonality between the first *Final Fantasy* and *Final Fantasy XV*.

One key aspect of many *Final Fantasy* games is the Job system. There are several types of Job class, though whether they're chosen by the player or assigned by the story depends on the game in question. Many of these are standard for RPGs, though the series has created some unique designs: the blue-cloaked Black Mage, whose gigantic yellow hat overshadows his face, showing only his glowing eyes; the Dragoon, a knight in dragon-esque armour who wields spears and has the ability to jump high into the sky and wage war from above; and the Samurai, who can literally toss money at his enemies to cause damage. Again, some games have greater customisation systems than others, with each entry tweaking the ability-learning systems to provide unique experiences.

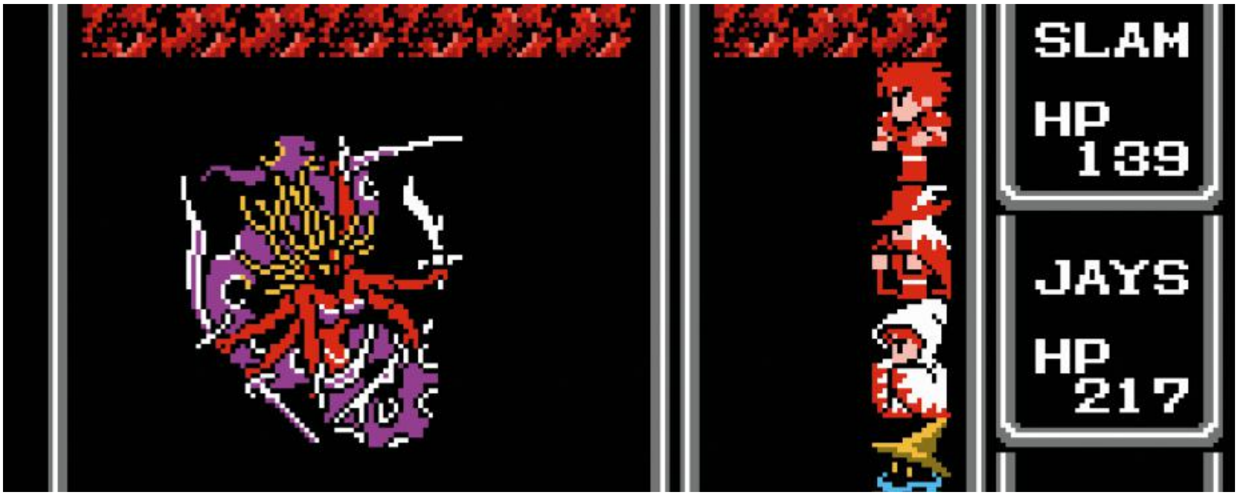
Another signature element is the Active Time Battle (ATB) system. Previous games were completely turn-based, allowing you to take your time when choosing commands. With this system, time flows even when you're not performing actions, with character's turns coming up based on their speed/agility stat, and requiring that you make quick decisions, lest you dawdle and let the enemy get in extra attacks. This system is found in most entries from the fourth game onward, and many other, later RPGs borrowed from it.

It's clear, based on the ATB, that the developers always wanted this to be a more exciting, engaging experience than most other RPGs, and as time went on, the battle systems tended to become more action-based. As graphical technology improved, the special moves became more visually impressive, particularly the summon beasts that can be caused to wreak havoc. This is why the more modern incarnations of *Final Fantasy* have moved away from a purely turn-based system.

Of course, with a series that's constantly evolving and changing comes fan receptions that are often wildly divided. This is true among hardcore fans of any long running franchise across any medium, but it's especially the case with *Final Fantasy*. Many long-time fans have a preference for *Final Fantasy VI*, the last 16-bit console entry, for its outstanding scenario, music, and visuals – basically, for being consistently the strongest in all of the elements the series is known for. More hardcore fans profess a preference for *Final Fantasy V*, which has a more flexible Job system, allowing you to find creative ways to succeed in difficult battles.

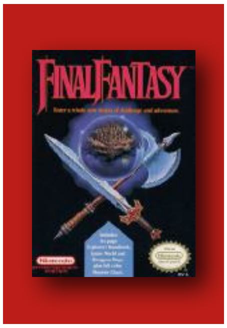
The most popular – and most historically important – is *Final Fantasy VII*, released in 1997 for the PlayStation. During the mid-'90s, most computer-generated animation was found in short films and multimedia CD-ROM computer software. Despite its ubiquitousness in the modern era, at the time the only major motion picture to use this style of animation was Pixar's *Toy Story*. *Final Fantasy VII* ramped up its cinematic aspects by including regular, full-screen cutscenes at key points, making full use of the space on the game's three CDs. These also effectively acted as its marketing campaign, which was the first, among games of its type, to use television advertising in North America. What this effectively did was to bring role-playing games into the English-speaking mainstream, helping turn *Final Fantasy* into an internationally recognised brand; its popularity helped greenlight the localisations of many later RPGs.

Subsequent titles were popular, albeit still divisive. In spite of erratic popular reception, they still routinely received high marks from contemporary critics. That changed with *Final Fantasy XIII*, the first title released in the HD era, for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. It suffered substantial development difficulties, something experienced by many Japanese companies at the time, which had trouble scaling up their programming practices and manpower to meet the needs of these new consoles. All of this was apparent in the end products, which were flashy, but saddled with numerous problems. These same issues plagued later games, to varying extents, though their reception has generally been more favourable. This doesn't take into account *Final Fantasy XI* or *Final Fantasy XIV*, both online-only entries, which are addressed separately, later in this book. There are also a large number of spinoffs outside of the mainline games – some of the RPG ones are featured near the end of this chapter.



Final Fantasy

Developer: Square | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): NES, MSX2, WSC, PS1, GBA, PSP



Like *Dragon Warrior*, *Final Fantasy* received strong promotion in North America thanks to the *Nintendo Power* magazine special strategy guide issues in late 1990.

Final Fantasy begins not with a title screen, but rather a prologue text scroll that tells of the coming of the four Warriors of Light who will save the world from darkness. From there, you can create your party of four members, from six different character classes. Fighters are the strongest physical attackers, while Black Belts aren't quite as powerful, but they don't need expensive equipment. Thieves have average attack skills but can run away very easily. White Mages and Black Mages have healing and attack magic, respectively, while Red Mages have a bit of both but lack access to the most powerful spells. Once you've put together your team, your first adventure involves saving the Princess Sara from the evil Garland. After this, you cross the bridge to the rest of the world, and the title screen is finally displayed, and you hear the song that would later become known as the *Final Fantasy* theme.

For the rest of the game you adventure all over the world, taking down the four elemental fiends, before returning to fight the demon Chaos. You'll also find various methods of transportation, including a canoe to row up narrow rivers, a boat to sail the seas, and an airship to fly almost anywhere. There's also a quest that allows you to promote each of your warriors to advanced classes – a Warrior becomes a Knight, a Thief becomes a Ninja, a Black Belt becomes a Master, and the Mages become Wizards. These unlock extra abilities, like simple healing spells for the Knight and some Black magic for the Ninja. There's also an optional hidden boss, a super-powerful robot named Warmech, a feature that has become standard in many later JRPGs.

Magic works differently from that in most games, in that it uses the Vancian magic originating from *Dungeons & Dragons*. Rather than having MP, there are eights levels of spells, each with a maximum stockable number (up to nine per level) before needing to recharge when depleted at an inn. The battles are more complicated than in *Dragon Quest*, allowing you to fight up to nine enemies at once, viewed from a side-on perspective. However, you need to keep track of both your characters' attack abilities and your enemies' HP. You order all of your characters before the turn starts, and if an enemy is killed, subsequent attacks will not target a different enemy, so you may waste turns basically swinging at thin air.

Other than the time-travelling plot twist at the end, *Final Fantasy* is fairly basic, but it holds up well next to *Dragon Quest III*, which was released two months later in Japan. It was ported several times, the best being the PlayStation version. This version has improved visuals and music, and you can play at either standard or reduced difficulty level. Every later port just includes the easy mode, but since there's not much story, there's not much reason to play this game if you remove the challenge, other than to experience the origin of the *Final Fantasy* tropes.

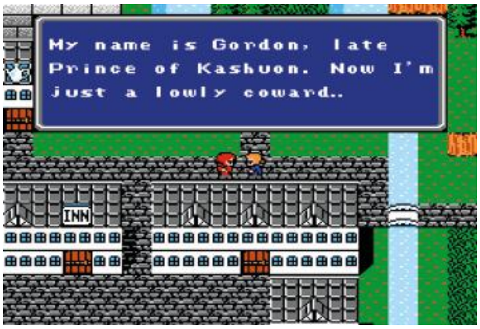
Final Fantasy II

Developer: Square | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): FC, WSC, PS1, GBA

Final Fantasy II starts off dramatically, as four characters are thrust immediately into battle against the soldiers of the Palamecian Empire. There's no real fighting against them, and your entire team is demolished almost immediately. The hero, Firion, awakens safely in a castle far away, and is greeted by his companions Guy and Maria, who also escaped with their lives and have become part of the Wild Rose Rebellion. But the fourth, Leon, has gone missing. The rest of the game is spent fighting against the evil Emperor Mateus, as well as discovering what happened to Leon.

Final Fantasy II looks and sounds just like its predecessor. However, this sequel demonstrates the series' flexibility when it comes to story and mechanics. You can no longer select character classes, sure, but the party members here have set names, backstories, and motivations. Additionally, the character in the fourth party slot changes throughout the story, as new adventurers join and leave, or more usually suffer some dramatic death. In a not-so-shocking twist, Leon is revealed to have joined the Empire after falling in the introductory battle, requiring you to face off against your old friend. While most English-speaking gamers are more familiar with this style of melodrama from *Final Fantasy IV* on the SNES, it originated with this game.

The story is pretty decent for an 8-bit RPG, if basic compared to later games. But mechanically, *Final Fantasy II* is … unusual. There are no set levels, and any party member can equip weapon or armour; instead characters gain stats based on specific actions. Characters' maximum HP will increase when taking damage, and their attack ability or spell level will improve with repeated use of the relevant weapon or specific magic. It means you need to be conscious of which actions will grow your character. (This system was inherited by the later *SaGa* series.) It also implements a more typical MP system for magic. This is all very interesting conceptually, but it's also time-consuming, awkward, and fairly buggy, especially in the initial Famicom release. It can be difficult to build your characters properly too, especially as having a high evasion level is important for the later parts of the game.



My name is Gordon, late Prince of Kashuon. Now I'm just a lowly coward..

***Final Fantasy II* establishes a recurring story theme, that of rebellions rising against evil empires.**

This is the first title in the *Final Fantasy* series to feature Chocobos, the large bird creatures that acts as steeds, and also the first game to feature a character named Cid. It also uses a "word memory" conversation system, allowing you to learn certain topics and discuss them with other NPCs, giving it an adventure game feel. For example, "rose" is a secret word to communicate that you're part of the rebellion.

Final Fantasy II is a weird experiment that was tough to play at the time and is even rougher nowadays. Storywise, most of the things it accomplishes are better implemented in later titles, although some of the later ports fix the balance, helping to make the game a little more approachable, but it still gives you a hard time.

Final Fantasy III

Developer: Square | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): FC, DS, PSP, WIN, IOS, AND

Final Fantasy III begins when four kids stumble into a cave and discover a crystal of light. It bestows special powers upon them, and instructs them to bring balance back to their world. And so begins an adventure, during which the quartet learns the history behind the floating continent they inhabit, the four legendary warriors that came before them, and the vile Cloud of Darkness that seeks to enshroud everything in chaos.

After the weird experiment that was *Final Fantasy II*, this one is something of a return to form, with a standard experience system and customisable, blank-slate characters, though it uses the standard MP system rather than the magic level system of the first game. The big addition here is that any of the four characters can switch job classes at any time, with 22 (23 in the DS remake) in total, compared to 12 in the original game. While their default role is that of Onion Knight, which is weak at first but can later grow extremely powerful, there are plenty of new and improved classes: Thieves can actually steal from enemies (as opposed to just having high agility); Dragoons have powerful Jump commands, which send them flying into the air and hurtling back to ground with a powerful strike; and Summoners can call upon a creature for various effects (a concept borrowed from Square's strategy game *Hanjuku Hero*). Job levels grow separately from experience levels, and switching jobs requires spending Capacity Points. The battles are faster and look sleeker, and now automatically move to a new target following defeat of a foe. Also introduced are Moogles, the cutesy white mole/bat hybrids that became one of the mascots of the series. There are also companion characters that join for short spurts and aid in combat, but are not directly controllable.

On its own merits, *Final Fantasy III* is a pretty good game. But its biggest feature, the swappable job system, was implemented in refined form in *Final Fantasy V* a few years down the line. And since *FFV* has so many other improvements, that leaves *FFIII* without much of an identity. If anything, it's mostly remembered for its insanely long final dungeon, which includes five boss fights but has no save points.

While the first two *Final Fantasy* games received a few upgraded ports over the years, the third game was passed over until it was completely remade in 2006 for the international release on the Nintendo DS (ported to a few other platforms like the PSP, Windows and smartphones). In addition to redoing the game in 3D, this remake gave the four characters new, unique designs and personalities, fleshed out the narrative a bit, and provided some extra quests. Job switching no longer requires points, but instead just weakens you for a few battles. Due to the redesign, the pace has changed, and fights play out differently, since there are fewer enemies at once. Its improvements don't really "fix" much of the game though, and at heart, it's still an 8-bit RPG.

Final Fantasy III **is back-to-basics, with a thinner story and less obscure mechanics than its predecessor, though it does establish the basis for the Job system found in later entries.**

Final Fantasy IV

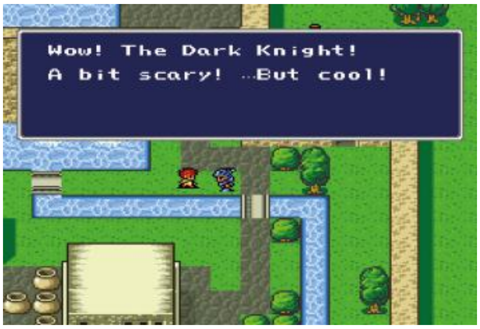
Developer: Square | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): SNES, PS1, WSC, GBA, PSP, DS, WIN, IOS, AND

With the move to the 16-bit SNES, *Final Fantasy IV* is an astronomical jump up from its predecessors. The hero is Cecil, a dark knight who's the leader of the Red Wings, a military outfit working for the King of Baron. During the introduction, Cecil and his crew are shown murdering fairly helpless people in order to steal their crystal. He pauses to consider that what he's doing might not be on the right side of the moral scale, eventually deciding to turn coat and fight against his old master.

There's a fairly extensive roster of characters who join Cecil's rebellion, including his girlfriend Rosa, a healer; Cid, a buddy from the kingdom of Baron and engineer of the usual *Final Fantasy* airship; Tellah, a powerful sage; Edward, a cowardly bard; Rydia, a young summoner girl; Edge, a ninja; Palom and Porom, twin magicians; and Yang, a karate master. The most compelling, and popular, crew member is Kain, a dragoon, who is Cecil's best friend and war buddy, but constantly switches allegiance between our heroes and the bad guys. The cast also contains a stereotypical if amusing villain in Golbez, the true seeker for the crystals. Even when the real final boss seems to have gone down, it's not over yet, as the penultimate foe summons all of his hatred, creating an ultra powerful monster, the sort of "true, ultimate, final boss that comes out of nowhere" unique to this kind of video game.

It's a classic story, filled with likeable heroes and memorable villains. Plus, 8-bit RPGs were constantly pushing the boundaries for the size and number of overworld maps – at its climax, *Final Fantasy IV* sends its heroes to the moon, where they pilot an airship called the Lunar Whale. But with the emphasis on strong characters, the customisation mechanics are basically cut out completely. Each character has their own class (Cecil switches from Dark Knight to Paladin once he renounces his evil past), and since the party can only hold five at once, many characters hop in and out of the party as the story demands, reducing your strategic options to whatever hand the game deals you. And while the plot is pretty decent, considering the sparse amount of dialogue, there's also an overwhelming amount of melodrama, as nearly half of the cast sacrifices themselves .... but most of them turn up alive later on, sometimes in comically unrealistic ways. It's fast and well-paced, though the final dungeon presents a big difficulty spike. It's nowhere near as dreadfully long as the one in its predecessor, but a good amount of time will probably be spent grinding here, before you can hope to survive the final encounters.

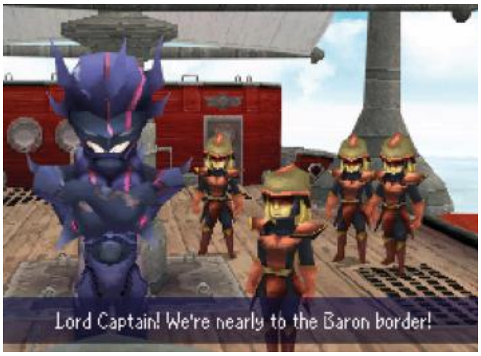
Much of the game feels familiar from the 8-bit days, though with more detailed sprites, and some fancy Mode 7 effects during airship flight. The music quality has improved by leaps and bounds – nearly every track on here is a classic, cementing Nobuo Uematsu's place as one of the best composers of the era, and putting the game next to *ActRaiser* as one of the best-sounding early games on the SNES.



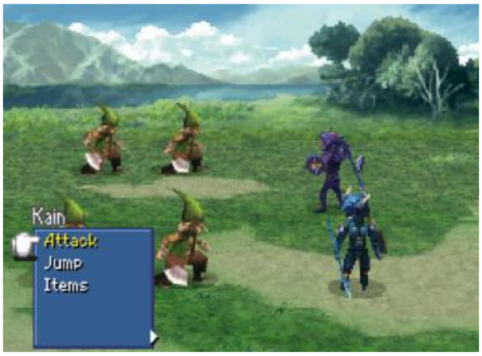
Wow! The Dark Knight!
A bit scary! …But cool!

FINAL FANTASY II
SUPER NINTENDO

Initially released as *Final Fantasy II* in North America, the game suffered from a bad translation, cut content, and nerfed difficulty, but still provided a story that enthralled gamers in ways that weren't possible on the original NES.



Lord Captain! We're nearly to the Baron border!



FINAL FANTASY IV
NINTENDO DS

The DS remake (also on smartphones and Windows) makes substantial changes to the game, and the polygonal models are pretty rough.

Final Fantasy IV also introduces the Active Time Battle (ATB) system. Turns don't happen in a set order, but are rather dictated by the character's (or enemy's) speed; some actions, like spell casting, take more time than just straight attacking. Time flows while you pick commands too, requiring that you make quick decisions. It's a way to make battles feel more exciting without drastically changing the way they play, and it was popular enough to be used in several subsequent *Final Fantasy* games.

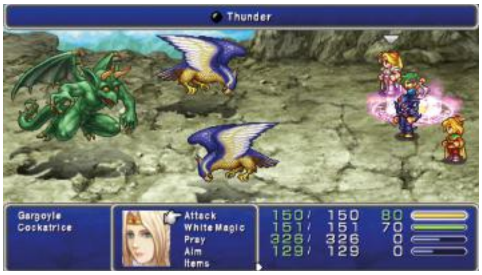
When the game was localised into English, under the name *Final Fantasy II*, the publishers must've felt it was too difficult, so some things were simplified. Some of these just involve tweaking enemy stats, but others are less welcome, such as removing many of the class-specific special abilities, like Cecil's Dark Knight skill that damages all of the on-screen enemies in exchange for some health. This altered version was then tweaked further and used as a basis for a re-release in Japan called *Final Fantasy IV Easytype*. The English translation is also quite poor, as it reads like it was written by a ten-year-old, and it's a wonder that any of the drama comes through. Other than as fan translations, North America didn't get the original version of *FFIV* until the release of the *Final Fantasy Chronicles* compilation pack on the PlayStation (which also included *Chrono Trigger*). This included a brand new, good quality English translation. Compared to all Square's other SNES-to-PS1 ports, this one is free of technical issues.

The game was later ported to the Wonderswan Color in Japan, creating a version with rather fun 8-bit renditions of the music, but not much else. It was also extremely buggy, which carried forward to the Game Boy Advance release. Subsequent versions eventually cleaned these issues up. The biggest improvement here is that you can select your party for the final dungeon, giving you more freedom of action than in the earlier ports.

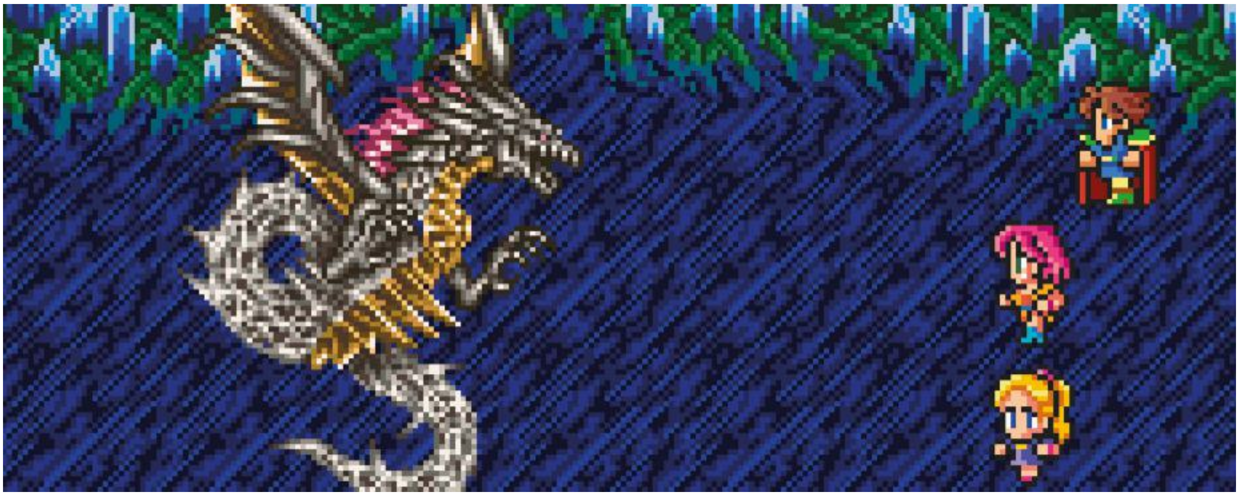
There are also two later remakes. The first, for the DS, is a ground-up reimagining using 3D models, as well as redone music and full voice acting. Unfortunately, the technical limitations of the system result in a messy-looking game. This version was later ported to mobile phones and Windows computers, but their higher resolution doesn't fix the janky polygonal models or the poor frame rate. These ports try to give some level of character customisation using the Augment system, in which using specific items on a character will give them certain abilities, depending on the point in the story. However, there's no way to identify these effects ahead of time without reading a strategy guide, so it feels tacked on. The game was also designed for people who had already played the SNES game, so the difficulty level is significantly amped up, especially in boss fights. It's also missing some of the tweaks from the GBA version.

A later PlayStation Portable release is more faithful to the original, rebuilt with new 2D sprites, as well as the choice between the original SNES or later DS music, though without voice acting. It does include the GBA extras, making this the best version.

Final Fantasy IV also received a sequel of sorts, as an anthology called *The After Years*. Initially made for mobile phones, it takes place many years after the original, and focuses on Cecil's son Ceodore. While it's fun to revisit the world of this game, the story is just official fan fiction, and the design has numerous problems, including far too many dungeons in which you don't have enough characters. These made their way into English on both the Wii Virtual Console, and on the PSP port.



The PSP port touches up the original 2D visuals and looks much better than Square's later efforts. It's also the version with the most complete content, though it is missing the voiced dialogue from the DS remake.



Final Fantasy V

Developer: Square | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): SFC, PS1, GBA, WIN

Final Fantasy V was regarded as a lost classic through most of the '90s – like the second and third entries on the Famicom, it was denied localisation, and was only officially released in 1999, as part of the *Final Fantasy Anthology* for the PlayStation. By this point, the series had earned a reputation for having interesting characters and dramatic narratives. And *Final Fantasy V* ... really doesn't.

The game stars five warriors – wanderer Bartz, princess Reina, pirate Faris, old man Galuf, and little girl Krile – as they fight against Exdeath, sort of a very evil tree. There are dragons and there are crystals; there are three different worlds to explore; there is a mildly amusing scene where Bartz and Galuf discover that Faris is actually a woman masquerading as a man. It also introduces the trope of the comedic boss character, with Gilgamesh, who, despite being at the centre of the climactic Battle on the Big Bridge, is a bit of a goofball. It's not an awful plot, but it feels fluffy compared to the stories that surround it.

Instead, *Final Fantasy V* excels through its implementation of the Job system. As in the third game, the characters can change jobs, based on what crystals they've found. However, they do gain Ability Points in battle, allowing them to permanently learn skills from that Job, so they can remain thus equipped even after switching to another one. This allows you to multi-class, so you can use the Monk's high HP gains to bolster up a weaker magician class, or learn the Ninja's dual-wielding skill so anyone else can use two weapons at once.

Though there are four characters in your party, there are some limitations, as you can only equip one other skill in addition to your main Job skills. (You can switch to a Freelancer class that lets you equip more, but you don't gain any new Job abilities.) The boss fights are also substantially harder than those in most of the other 16- and 32-bit games, so you really need to experiment to find the class builds that combine most effectively for the given scenario. Since you're given so much freedom to customise your characters, it's also immensely more replayable than other *Final Fantasy* titles, in which the stories lose their impact after the first playthrough.

The initial English PlayStation release is not great. The load times are noticeable and the script is rather poor, comparing badly to the fan translation that preceded it by a few years. The later Game Boy Advance port is the ideal version, as it has much better writing, improved graphics, and a few extra Jobs that pop up near the end.

Final Fantasy V was the last *FF* game to be directed by creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, who moved to a producer role in later games, before leaving Square after the failure of the *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* movie. With the passing of batons to a new team, it feels like a change of generations, both in aesthetics and storytelling, but one necessary to keep the series fresh, especially when the PlayStation rolled around.

FINAL FANTASY V

Want a challenge? Join the annual "*Final Fantasy V* Four Job Fiesta", in which you must play through the game with four randomly chosen Jobs.

Final Fantasy VI

Developer: Square | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SFC, SNES, PS1, GBA, WIN

Final Fantasy VI (initially released in North Amerca as *Final Fantasy III*) begins with a young woman named Terra, who's been brainwashed into becoming a superweapon for the Empire. She is rescued by a heroic thief named Locke, himself part of a resistance group, where she learns that she's actually a member of an ancient race called Espers. And so, the heroes band together to save the world. Except they fail, as the maniacal Imperial mage Kefka causes ruin across the land. With everyone scattered to the winds, post-apocalypse, they must band back together and once again fight for justice.

GUARD: Imperial Magitek Armor?
Not even Narshe's safe
anymore!

FINAL FANTASY VI

There are 14 characters in *Final Fantasy VI*, and while Terra is the protagonist in the opening section, the viewpoint regularly switches to focus on others. The scenario design balances comedy and tragedy much better than before, with one of the highlights being the Phantom Train, this game's version of the River Styx. However, the centrepiece is the Opera, where former Imperial general Celes must impersonate a singer to woo the high-flying gambler Setzer, all while outwitting the recurring comic villain, the octopus Ultros. Complete with sampled faux-vocals coming out of the SNES, it's a masterpiece of storytelling and sound engineering.

The game blends the unique character abilities of *FFIV* with the customisation of *FFV*, offering a large number of interesting skills. Edgar, the playboy prince, has unlimited use of tools like crossbows and chainsaws; a musclebound Sabin, his brother, can execute powerful moves in response to *Street Fighter II*-esque command motions, to execute powerful moves; the young artist Relm can sketch characters on the battlefield to make them temporarily fight in her favour. Anyone can equip Espers, which can be used as summon beasts as well as permanently teach magic spells; other abilities are enabled using items called relics. This, combined with the ability to customise the four members of your battle team, allows for a fairly large amount of flexibility. The structure is also different in each part of the story – in the first half, the World of Balance, everything is pretty linear, while in the second, the World of Ruin, you're given open access to the world once you find the airship, as you hunt down the rest of your crew to take on Kefka again.

This game is the first directed by Yoshinori Kitase, who helmed the series through to the tenth entry. Not only is it graphically more impressive than the previous games – the map sprites are now identical to the larger battle sprites, the elaborate tile work is gorgeous, the magic spell effects show off SNES technical wizardry – but it also marks *Final Fantasy*'s shift away from traditional fantasy. While previous games had some elements of sci-fi, this entry leans more towards steampunk, with advanced technology that allows castles to bury themselves and tunnel under the ground, as well as walking mechas called Magitek. Combined with Nobuo Uematsu's brilliant score – the overworld theme is a masterpiece – it's *Final Fantasy* firing on all cylinders.

There's no real fan consensus as to which is the "best" *Final Fantasy* game, but this sixth entry is certainly one of the most beloved, owing to its steampunk setting, large cast of likeable characters, and amazing music.

Final Fantasy VII

Developer: Square | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1, WIN, PS4

Final Fantasy VII focuses on Cloud, a mercenary and ex-member of the elite guard squad SOLDIER, who's found himself working with an eco-terrorist group called Avalanche. The Shinra Electric Power Corporation, such a gigantic entity that it's built its own city, is harvesting a natural resource called Mako, which is slowly draining the planet of its life energy. The game begins in that city, a sprawling, dual-layer dystopia called Midgar, and Cloud and his partners are attempting to blow up one of the Mako reactors. As is the case with many *Final Fantasy* games, Shinra is an antagonist but not THE antagonist – that title goes to Sephiroth, another member of SOLDIER and the result of a genetic experiment with a mysterious life force from the planet's past. As the group of heroes tracks him down and attempts to prevent him from using the planet's life force for his own evil purposes, Cloud's own distorted past catches up with him, as he isn't necessarily who he thinks himself to be.

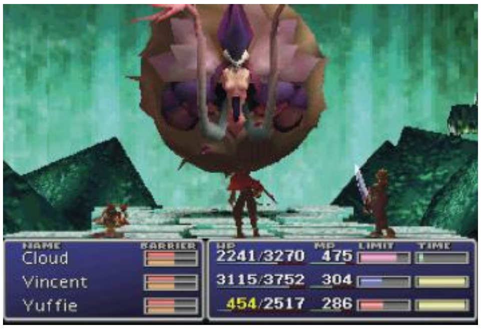
The plot is kind of a mess, partially because having an unreliable narrator as a protagonist in this type of RPG is hard to pull off, and partially because the English localisation is only barely comprehensible. Still, it's hard to fault the ambition of the story, and it does make for some interesting plot twists. It also shares its predecessor's knack for interesting locations, setpieces, and characters. The dingy slums of Midgar remain the most memorable part of the game, decades after its release, but it also features the hedonistic amusement park Golden Saucer, and the pilgrimage site Cosmo Canyon, where the mysteries of the planet are explained in a planetarium. There are plenty of mini-games, as you escape via the highways of Midgar on a motorcycle, snowboard down a wintry slope, or defend a fortress in a real-time strategy game.

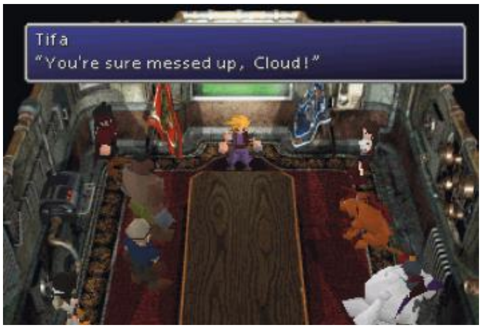
Tetsuya Nomura stepped in as character designer in this instalment. Cloud defined the Japanese trope of big swords and spiky hair, but the rest of the cast is almost as iconic: gruff Barrett, who has a machine gun for an arm; Tifa, a bartender/kung-fu master; Aerith (or Aeris in the original translation), a flower girl who is sought after by Shinra; Cid, the grouchy airship pilot; Vincent, an undead gunslinger; Red XIII, a sentient, talking lion-like beast; Yuffie, an impish ninja thief; and Cait Sith, undoubtedly the weirdest character, a cat with a megaphone riding on top of a gigantic moogle. Shinra and Sephiroth make for memorable antagonists, but the series' trope of goofy not-quite bad guys is maintained with the Turks, an organisation of stylish investigators who often find themselves fighting the heroes but are so gosh-darned likeable – especially rookie agent Elena – that they become endearing.

Most of the areas – towns, dungeons, etc. – are now CG-rendered bitmaps, consisting of a handful of screens, so you can't explore as much. Simultaneously, it can be a little difficult to navigate them, since it's not always clear where you can and can't walk. The characters here are rendered

PlayStation
FINAL FANTASY VII

While Japanese RPGs had a modest international fanbase beforehand, it was *Final Fantasy VII* that introduced the genre to the international mainstream audience.




Tifa
“You're sure messed up, Cloud!”

Despite being such a monumental release, the English translation for the PS1 *Final Fantasy VII* is kind of a mess, if still often amusing.

in chibi-polygonal form, which look a little silly when the camera is zoomed in. Battles, however, are rendered entirely in 3D, with more realistically proportioned characters; these are basically the same as in the previous games, just adding a more dynamic camera that pans and zooms around, making things a little more exciting.

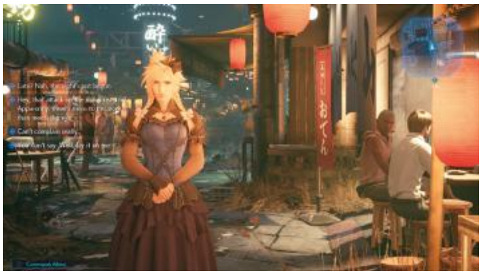
The full motion video cinematics, which are what caught the public's eye, and why the game is on three CDs, seem quaint nowadays. The animation is choppy, there's no voice acting, and the character models are inconsistent, occasionally using super-deformed styles. Still, the art design remains fantastic, and it's leaps and bounds beyond what most other game developers were doing. The soundtrack is stellar; among its many famous tunes, ranging from the cinematic "Bombing Mission" track that plays in the prologue, to the seven-minute long overworld theme, is "One Winged Angel", the final battle theme, which is accompanied with spoken Latin chants.

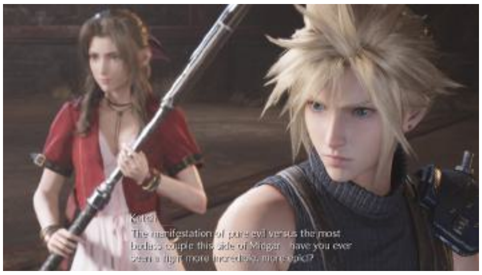
In combat, the number of characters is reduced to three, and character customisation is performed by equipping orbs called Materia. It's the Materia, not the characters, that learn the skills, so they can be swapped back and forth as necessary. This has the side effect of making all of the characters almost interchangeable, outside of their Limit Break attacks, which are super-moves that are enabled when someone has taken enough damage.

There's some roughness to *Final Fantasy VII,* which can be attributed it to being so ambitious, and while some parts are a bit dated, most of the core aspects still hold up; it more than earns its place as a hugely influential classic in its own right.

After this game, Square continued the *Final Fantasy* trend of sequential stories for each new sequel, but that didn't stop fans from wanting to learn more about Cloud and company. This led Square to the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* multimedia project, which began in 2004. This included *Before Crisis*, a Japan-only mobile game focusing on the Turks; *Dirge of Cerberus*, a rather dire third-person shooter for the PS2 starring Vincent; *Crisis Core*, a prequel for the PSP starring Zack, a minor but important character in the original *Final Fantasy VII; Advent Children*, a full length animated movie sequel that has some impressive fight scenes but questionable storytelling; and *Last Order*, a brief animated piece elaborating on one of the key scenes of the game.

The quality of these was inconsistent, though, and for a long time, Square teased a full-on remake of *Final Fantasy VII.* This didn't actually become a reality until much later down the line, as the project was split into several parts, with the first being released in 2020. Everything has been completely remade, with near-movie quality cutscenes, fully voiced dialogue, and many, many remixes of popular songs. The turn-based battle system has given way to an action-based one, similar to those in *Kingdom Hearts* and *Final Fantasy XV*, though with the ability to switch between any of the characters. The first release focuses entirely on Midgar, which only occupied about five hours (out of 40 or so) of the original game, but has been drastically expanded, beyond what was on the original PlayStation release; this one also includes some backstory elements from the tie-in media. For the most part, it works incredibly well – the characters are given much more personality than in the original version (particularly Aerith), though some segments do drag on for way too long. There are also some plot changes and additions, and by the end, it's clear that director Tetsuya Nomura wants to try something different instead of just retelling the story we already know.





PS4
FINAL FANTASY VII
REMAKE

The long awaited *Final Fantasy VII Remake* was finally released in 2020; it recreates many of the game's most popular moments, including Cloud's famous cross-dressing experience.

Final Fantasy VIII

Developer: Square | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1

Final Fantasy VIII is about a teenage mercenary force called SeeD, as it squares off against an evil Sorceress who is threatening all existence. It starts off simply enough, but it eventually gets pretty wild, as you deal with immortal witches, time travel, monsters from the moon, and a few shockingly dumb plot twists. Visually, it marks a move towards more realistic-looking characters, both in and out of battle; they are also texture mapped, unlike *FFVII*'s shaded character models. The setting is less traditional fantasy and instead more modern, with some sci-fi elements, though it still has incredible architectural designs, thanks to Square's ever-excellent artists.

This realistic approach extends to the writing, with the characters tending to act more like real people than fantasy heroes. And given that all of the playable party members are teenagers, that leads to plenty of drama. Squall, in the "hero" position, is in fact an anti-hero loner, irritated by his position as group leader. The heroine is Rinoa, a misfit in her role as underground resistance team leader. The central tale of *Final Fantasy VIII* is their love story, and nothing about it feels earned. (One climactic moment, accompanied by a song "Eyes on Me", from Hong Kong singer Faye Wong, is more cheesy than romantic.) Of the supporting cast, the most interesting is Laguna, a mysterious man from the past who regularly appears in Squall's dreams. With his goofy demeanour, awesome machine gun, and rocking techno battle theme, he ends up being way more likeable than the actual heroes, even if his actual role in the main story doesn't really fit.

The character customisation system is by far the most unique the series has ever seen. There is no armour, weaponry is limited, and while you do gain levels, enemies scale along with the party, so just grinding is useless. The popular *Final Fantasy* summon beasts called Guardian Forces (GFs), take centre stage here. They are equipped on your character, which modifies their stats, and can be summoned almost without limit in battle. Magic is not cast via MP, but rather spells are individually stocked like items. In addition to being cast, they can be "junctioned" to your stats, with each type of spell having different effects, including modifying elemental affinities or giving you the ability to inflict status effects. The most straightforward way to get magic is to Draw spells from enemies that hold them, though they can also be crafted from stones dropped by foes. It's very easy to play this game "wrong", because if you just run through every battle summoning GFs or Drawing constantly, it'll get tedious, but once it clicks it allows for plenty of flexibility, and is a ton of fun to play with. Plus, there's an optional sub-quest involving a fun card game called Triple Triad.

Final Fantasy VIII is hugely experimental in both storytelling and mechanics, which is admirable after the international success of its predecessor. It doesn't entirely work, but it remains fascinatingly weird nonetheless.

PlayStation
FINAL FANTASY VIII
SQUARESOFT

The heroes of *Final Fantasy VIII* are a bunch of teenage mercenaries who attend a gigantic flying school. Also, there are dinosaurs on its training grounds, and the whole place is partially ruled by a blob-like monster that lives in its basement. It's hard to understate how incredibly bizarre this game is.

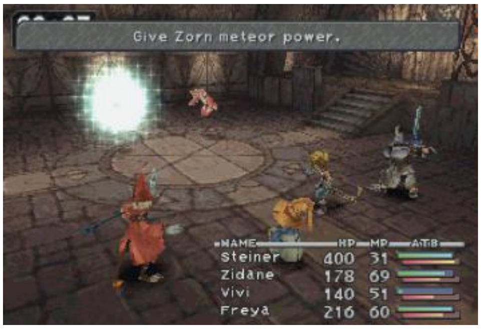
Final Fantasy IX

Developer: Square | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS1

Final Fantasy VII and *VIII* were marked changes of style, so the final entry in the PlayStation trilogy returns to its fantasy roots – swords and sorcery! Airships! Classic character classes! The game begins as the Tantalus theatre troupe, led by the hero Zidane, attempts to kidnap Princess Garnet of Alexandria during one of its stage shows. Things don't go quite as planned, mostly because Garnet actually wants to be kidnapped, and ends up running off with them. The evil Queen, who is creating an army of magic automatons, and has ambitions to take on the world, chases after them. But actually pulling the strings is Kuja, Zidane's brother, who is the game's primary villain.

Final Fantasy IX has a much more lighthearted tone than the preceding games, owing much to its characters. Zidane, the thief with a monkey tail, is a lighthearted and charming ladies man, while goofy knight captain Steiner remains baffled at the world outside of the castle walls. The most endearing character is Vivi, the little Black Mage kid who gets wrapped up in the adventure. The character designs are not quite super-deformed, but not quite realistic either, and some of them are just strange, particularly the anthropomorphic characters like Freya, the rat woman Dragoon, and Quina, the Blue Mage, who is some kind of grinning, ravenous clown monster.

There are little bits that reference elements of past games, though some of them relate to titles that hadn't been released in English at the time (like a story that references Josef from *Final Fantasy II*) or use inconsistent localisations that make them hard to appreciate. (The Gurgu Volcano from the first game is rendered as "Gulug", for example.) *FFIX* also pays tribute to the "super big bad boss that comes out of nowhere" in the final battles, à la Zeromus from *Final Fantasy IV*.



Give Zorn meteor power.

NAME	HP	MP	ATB
Steiner	400	31	
Zidane	178	69	
Vivi	140	51	
Freya	216	60	

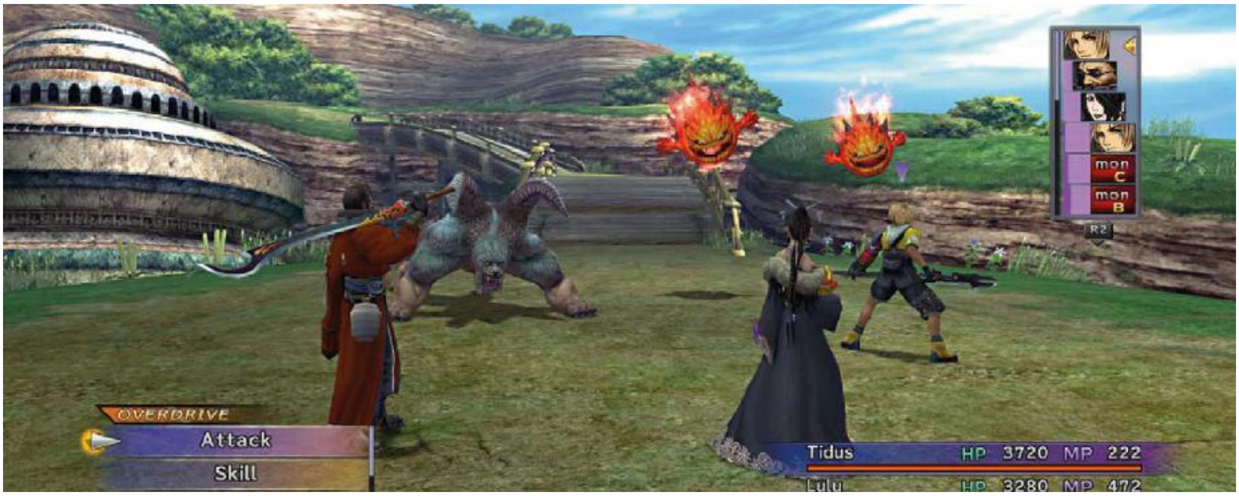
FINAL FANTASY IX
PlayStation
SQUARESOFT

The visuals, outside of the weird characters, are gorgeous, and while Nobuo Uematsu appears to be spreading himself thin, the soundtrack is generally excellent, and the vocal track "Melodies of Life" is better used here than "Eyes on Me", especially the rendition in the overworld. There's also a new card game called Tetra Master, though it's not quite as much fun as Triple Triad.

Final Fantasy IX's gameplay systems are simplified from predecessor's, disappointingly so. Abilities are attached to specific equipment, and the only way to learn them permanently is to continually use it. Considering certain items can only be used by certain characters, the customisation is thus extremely limited. The battle scenes do allow four characters, but the trade-off is that the loading times are long, and the speed is extremely slow, though these problems are mitigated by speed-up options in later ports.

Considering how divided the reception was to the previous PlayStation *Final Fantasy* games, this one is certainly more agreeable. So although it's a charming game, the absence of any narrative or technical risk-taking means that it's lacking the ambition that has otherwise typified the series.

***Final Fantasy IX* isn't the most popular game in the series, but it is one of the most universally loved, largely thanks to its excellent writing and cast of characters.**



Final Fantasy X / X-2

Developer: Square | Released: 2001 | Platform(s): PS2, PS3, PS4, PSV, WIN, NSW

Tidus is a young athlete, famous throughout the city of Zanarkand for his skills as a Blitzball player. But disaster soon strikes, as a gigantic beast destroys the entire city, and sucks Tidus up with it. He doesn't die, but instead awakens in a land called Spira. Here, he learns that the Zanarkand he calls home was destroyed hundreds of years ago. More pressingly, that same monster that sucked him up – an enormous beast called Sin – is regularly terrorising Spira. As he learns, Sin can never be completely defeated, only briefly quelled, a task taken on by a summoner making a pilgrimage across the land. This summoner is a young woman named Yuna, who immediately takes to Tidus, and he comes along as her guard for her journey. To add to the drama, Tidus learns that Sin is actually, somehow, his father, who gave him a rather abusive upbringing, and is the target of much resentment.

Final Fantasy X marks a further turning point towards cinema for not only the series, but Japanese role-playing in general. With the power of the PlayStation 2, the character models are not only much more realistic, but nearly the entire game world is created with polygons. This allows for more dynamic cameras, as well as more prevalent cutscenes, filled with voice acting. This is common nowadays, but in 2001, it was groundbreaking. It was also somewhat in its infancy, as the cutscene direction now looks a bit robotic. This had an effect on the quality of the voice acting, which, for the most part, is fairly well done ... but the lips and actions were created for Japanese dialogue, and the English voice sync is awkward.

PlayStation.2
FINAL FANTASY X
SQUARESOFT

Perhaps in keeping with the feel of being an interactive movie, *Final Fantasy X* is incredibly linear. To some extent, this has been true since the 16-bit days, as the narrative was always propelling you in a forward direction. But those games at least offered towns to explore, or overworlds to traipse around, to at least give the illusion of freedom. That's only barely the case here, where many areas are just straight lines forward, with paths offering occasional small branches that hide extra items. There's not even a proper overworld map, and once you get access to the usual airship, it's just a menu of previously visited places from which you can select. Its emphasis on narrative is so strong that you can't even skip cutscenes, which makes replaying it something of a pain.

But to some extent, that linearity pays off, as it allowed Square to lavish attention on the supremely gorgeous world of Spira, among the best in any JRPG. Based on the tropical regions of Southeast Asia, the architecture, the outfits, and everything else are uniquely defined; it's a game world unlike any other. This level of detail is carried over into the intricacies of the cultures that inhabit it. As is understandable for a culture that's constantly in a cycle of death and rebirth, the people of Spira have developed their own religion around it, for better or worse. To replace the card games from other *Final Fantasy* titles, there's also Blitzball, which is a sort of turn-based underwater version of soccer.

The main cast includes Wakka, another Blitzball player and man of religious faith; Rikku, a member of the mechanically inclined

While perhaps too cinematic and linear, *Final Fantasy X* is still a masterclass in world design, in terms of both visuals and lore.

***Final Fantasy X* certainly tells a better love story than *FFVIII*, if mostly because the couple is actually somewhat likeable.**

Al Bhed race; Auron, an old man and powerful swordsman, who knows more about the mystery of Tidus and Spira than he lets on; Lulu, a black magician with a goth fashion sense; and Kimahri, a strong but silent beastman. Tidus and Yuna remain the heart of the story though, and their romance is far more touching and believable than Squall and Rinoa's in *Final Fantasy VIII*. The main antagonist is a minister named Seymour, who seeks to use Sin for his own power, and rather comically, also tries to marry Yuna, allowing for a dramatic scene where the team crashes their wedding.

The battle system ditches the usual *Final Fantasy* ATB setup in favour of a typical turn-based one. Here, the turn order is displayed on a queue on the side of the screen, indicating when each combatant will react. You can switch between any party members at any time, which is useful, since certain characters are strong against certain types of enemies – Wakka's Blitzball attacks make quick work of flying enemies, while Auron can slice through thick armour.

The character customisation system is the Sphere Grid, which is shaped like a game board. Each character travels on a path and unlocks various stat upgrades and skills, with occasional forks in the road. It only really gets interesting later in the game, when you can pick up a character's piece and move it to a different path, allowing for more interesting hybrids. The Expert grid added to the later re-releases allows you to choose where each character starts off, though once you commit, you still can't actually customise much.

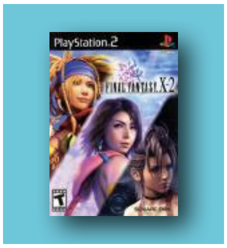
Even though it's such a guided experience, the incredible world design is what really sells *Final Fantasy X*. It also marks the first time that Square developed a straight sequel in the same game world, called *Final Fantasy X-2*. Taking place a few years after Sin's defeat, Spira is basically holding a near-continuous party. The game casts Yuna in the leading role, along with Rikku, as well as a new character, Paine, a brooding swordswoman who takes over the goth look from Lulu, who sits on the sidelines here. They've formed a gang called the Gullwings, who hunt spheres from the ruins around Spira.

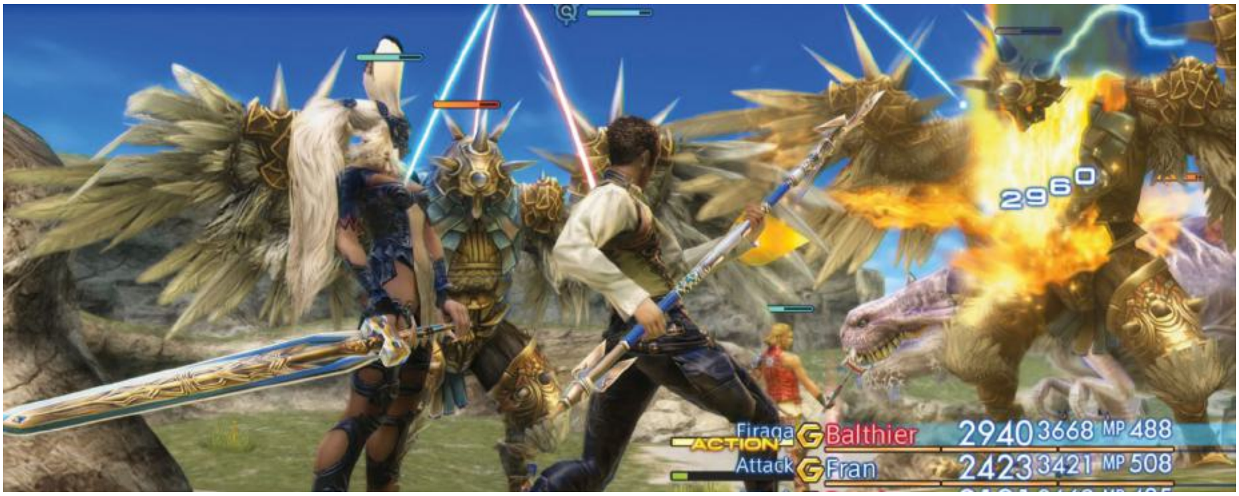
Despite starring many of the same characters, much has changed in *Final Fantasy X-2*. The structure is mission-based, and you choose, using a menu, from various areas to explore, some of which are reused from the previous game. The ATB battle system returns, and also uses an alteration of the Job system found in the 16-bit titles. Here, any of the three woman can change outfits in or out of combat, to change her abilities. Not only is this a ton of fun, but it's a veritable fashion show, as each outfit is adjusted for each woman, and many of them are just fabulous.

But it's a strange game, since the vibe is so different. *Final Fantasy X*'s Spira was gorgeous but morose. Everything is so much peppier here, with the main trio coming off as something like an anime *Charlie's Angels*. The music, provided by Noriko Matsueda, is much poppier than the average *Final Fantasy* soundtrack, but not really in a good way. Similarly, the sense of humour doesn't often work – Brother, a compatriot of Rikku's, is stunningly obnoxious, and the rival sphere-hunting gang, led by a woman named Leblanc, who has two incompetent underlings, feels rather juvenile. There are other problems too – in particular, how you unlock the good ending (and find out why Tidus is missing) is so obscure that it requires a guide. Altogether, the battle system is incredibly fun, but the framework surrounding it is only barely tolerable.

Both games were compiled together for *Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster*, on assorted platforms. Beyond the high-definition graphics, it also redoes many of the main character models, at least for *FFX*, though the results are mixed. There are also some new arrangements of certain songs, though none of them really needed this treatment. This release also included extras found in the re-issued *International* versions, which were not initially released in North America.

***Final Fantasy X-2* is such a drastic departure in tone and style from its predecessor that it almost feels like fan fiction.**





Final Fantasy XII

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PS2, PS4, WIN, NSW, XB1

The *Final Fantasy* series typically changed things up between entries, but the 12th game got more of a shake-up than most. That said, it's not entirely divergent from previous games in the series. The story takes place in the world of Ivalice, introduced in Yasumi Matsuno's PlayStation SRPG *Final Fantasy Tactics*. Square also looked to *Final Fantasy XI*, the online-only entry. *FFXII* was thus created in a new style: basically a single-player MMORPG. The end result, as always, was divisive, but with plenty of strong merits.

As with most Matsuno plots, the story is dense with politics, but the main conflict revolves around the small country of Dalmasca, which has been invaded by the powerful Archadian Empire. At the core of this is Captain Basch, a Dalmascan knight captain who is framed for killing the king, and Princess Ashe, who fakes her own death and goes into hiding. However, the player views these events through the eyes of young Vaan, a street urchin who ends up getting caught in the rebellion against Archadia. The main cast of characters also includes Penelo, Vaan's friend, and the sky pirate duo: dashing Balthier and his partner Fran.

With Matsuno as the writer/director, *Final Fantasy XII* feels similar to his previous games. The character designs by Akihiko Yoshida have a more Western medieval feel with extra flamboyance, while musicians Hitoshi Sakimoto, Masaharu Iwata, and Hayato Matsuo bring their signature orchestral stylings to the moody dungeon-crawling themes and rousing battle pieces. This entry includes some of the races found in *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance*, such as the bunny-like Viera and lizard-like Bangaa, and the Moogles are back. The game also makes airships, another *Final Fantasy* standby, an integral part of the story, with some cool magic/science hybrid designs.

The areas are larger and much more open than in *Final Fantasy X*, giving much more room to explore. Though the plot is still linear, the deserts that connect the various kingdoms of Ivalice are expansive, and the world feels much less constrained than in previous games. There are also tons of sub-quests, on behalf of the various guilds.

There are no longer any random battles, and combat occurs in real time. Since you can realistically only control one character at a time, the Gambit system essentially allows you to program all of your other characters' AI. While many other action-oriented RPGs, like the *Star Ocean* and *Tales* series, have similar features, *Final Fantasy XII* offers a lot more freedom in customising your actions by allowing if-then statements. The most basic Gambits can simply tell all of your characters to attack the same monster as the party leader, or target the enemy with the lowest HP. You can prearrange for one ally to cast a healing spell if another's HP dips below a given percentage. You can set up a character to immediately cure any status ailment, target fire-based enemies with ice spells, or make sure that your party always has Haste or Protect cast on them.

While it may seem that the use of Gambits essentially lets the game play itself, in fact you need

PlayStation.2
FINAL FANTASY XII
SQUARE ENIX

***Final Fantasy XII* has a distinctly different, more mature feel compared to rest of the series, largely due to the influence of Yasumi Matsuno.**

The character models look incredible on the PlayStation 2, and hold up remarkably well even in the HD re-release.

to constantly tweak and adjust the programs you devise, until you find a combination of commands that works for the party you've built, while jumping in to issue manual commands as necessary. Still, it has some issues – you're given limited slots, especially in the beginning, and the Gambits themselves are slowly administered over the course of the game, greatly limiting what you can do with them until you're quite a way into the game.

The License system is similar to the Sphere Grid from *Final Fantasy X*, though far less restrictive. Each character has a starting spot on a board, and can use obtained License Points to unlock a square, teaching that skill and allowing you to move to any of those surrounding it. That way, you can control the emphasis, towards beefing up stats, or learning specific abilities. Unusually, access to various pieces of equipment also needs to be unlocked, too. In the original release of the game, each character starts on a different part of the board, but in the long term, they all converge. The later *International* PS2 version (and *The Zodiac Age* HD revisions) allow you to choose different boards based on various *Final Fantasy* Job classes, allowing better customisation.

This all takes getting used to, and there's quite a bit of dungeon crawling, more so than *Final Fantasy* fans may be used to. However, as far as the story goes, it feels like *Final Fantasy XII* is missing something. Though the plot is typical of the series – rebellion fights evil empire! – it's told in a slightly more highbrow manner, but this also means it's missing the romance and melodrama that made the previous games so effective. The villains – the Archadian prince Vayne and his Judges, an elite guard dressed in striking black armour – sure look cool, but they don't have much presence, and as a result, when it's time to fight them, the major battles lack emotional resonance. It's not that the game is dour – Balthier has some particularly brilliant one-liners, delivered in a slick, faux-aristocratic British accent – but the narrative itself is just thin. This becomes more evident the further you get in the game, where many dungeons and several hours often pass between plot points. Matsuno left the project partway through, citing health reasons, and you can definitely see the cracks. Still, the localisation is stellar – it's that rare game that never once reminds you that you're playing a game that was originally in a totally different language.

It seemed jarring at the time, but *Final Fantasy XII* marked an evolutionary branch that other RPGs later followed, particularly Monolith's *Xenoblade* series. It ends up feeling a little bit more like a Western RPG, but with the style and mechanical depth more prevalent in Japanese RPGs, and it still feels modern even years after its release.

Final Fantasy XII did take some heat for putting young pretty-boy Vaan in the starring role, when the grizzled war hero Basch is really the main character. Vaan doesn't have a major role in the story, just kinda tagging along as it proceeds, so he feels a little redundant once the plot starts moving, but the developers make up for this in the spinoff sequel, *Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings*. A real-time strategy game for the DS, it casts Vaan and Penelo as sky pirates, and brings in further elements from other Matsuno games, like the winged races seen in *Tactics Ogre*. It's a little messy, as all of these touch-screen DS RTS games were, but it retroactively fixes up Vaan's role in the universe, and nicely expands both the characters and the world.

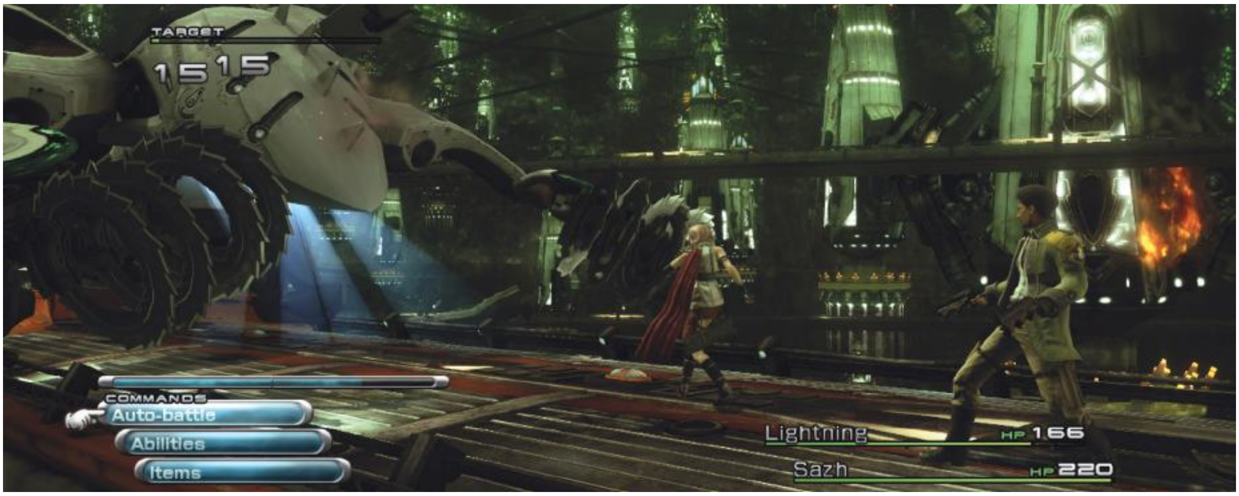
***Revenant Wings*, the *Final Fantasy XII* DS sequel/spinoff, tends to be forgotten, because it's a totally different type of game.**

LEADER
Magicks/Abilities
Gambits
Select magick or ability.

Alraune
LEVEL 01
Type: Melee
Nature –
Weakness –
Resistance –
Irritable beast short of stature and temper.

Yeah, It'd sure be nice to have some adventures of our own for a change!

NINTENDO DS
FINAL FANTASY XII



Final Fantasy XIII (series)

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): PS3, X360, WIN

PS3
FINAL FANTASY XIII
SQUARE ENIX

Final Fantasy XIII begins on a world called Cocoon, a gigantic sphere floating above another planet called Gran Pulse. There is growing paranoia about Pulse, and citizens that are thought to have been in contact with it are evicted as part of a massive Purge. Six characters are initially chosen, by godlike beings called fal'Cie, for a mysterious purpose, communicated only through visions, ultimately leading them to save both worlds.

This is the short version of the story, but as presented in the game, it's more vague and confusing. It's filled with jargon (fal'Cie as the gods, l'Cie as the chosen ones, a Focus as their goal) and communicated poorly to the player. Much of the backstory is doled out in bits and pieces, and substantial amounts of lore are contained solely in the option menu's guidebook, instead of being communicated by in-game characters and cutscenes. This is mostly because *Final Fantasy XIII*'s development was a mess. While Western developers were adapting to middleware platforms like the Unreal Engine, Square decided to make its own, called Crystal Tools. This resulted in substantial delays, and these problems manifest themselves in the final product, as the game attempts to cobble everything into something sensible, and ultimately fails.

It doesn't help that the writing, provided by *Final Fantasy X-2* scribe Motomu Toriyama, is pretty bad. It does cast a female character as the primary protagonist, in Lightning, but she's stoic to the point of being boring. Sazh is a less stereotypical black hero than Barrett was, and even has a tiny Chocobo living in his afro, but he's one of the few standouts. As the teenage leader of a resistance movement, the dunderheaded Snow is completely unbelievable, and incredibly chipper girl Vanille is so inappropriately upbeat that it almost seems like she's suffered brain damage.

The game's saving grace is its battle system, which combines the pre-*FFX* ATB system with *FFXII*'s Gambit system. The player only directly controls one character, and instead the actions of the others are dictated by Paradigms, giving roles like attacker, tank, and healer to the others. There is no MP, so magic spells (except super-power attacks) can be cast freely, and characters are fully healed after battle. It's consistently engaging, since you need to observe the flow of combat and change tactics on the fly, and the battle animations really make it feel like an action game, despite your limited direct control. Alas, the game very slowly unveils aspects of the battle system over the course of the game, so you don't get to use it fully until near the end.

Sadly, the game focuses on the story and battle system above everything else. *Final Fantasy X* was quite linear, but at least that had towns and assorted pit-stops to break up the action. Here, almost every area is presented as a straight line – you just run, fight some battles, watch some cutscenes, and continue, until you're near the end of the game. There are no towns, barely any NPCs; shops are simply found at save points.

The Japanese game industry had many problems adapting to HD development in the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 era, and those issues greatly affected the quality of *Final Fantasy XIII.*

The area opens up a bit when you reach Pulse, near the end of the game, but until then it's just open areas containing a bunch of monster-hunting quests but not much else. As expected of Square, the visual design is incredible, and Tetsuya Nomura's characters still look great, but there's no cohesion to the locations, compared to the lush island of Spira. The soundtrack by Masashi Hamauzu (*Final Fantasy X, Unlimited Saga*) is very different from Uematsu's music, but it's still quite good – he has a propensity for violins and they work very well in the main battle theme.

Final Fantasy games have always been divisive, but its numerous issues caused this one to have more of a mixed reception than most. Nevertheless, it led to two direct sequels.

Final Fantasy XIII-2 starts three years after the ending of the first game. Lightning has seemingly sacrificed her life to save the worlds, and her sister Serah mourns her loss. Then, a mysterious boy named Noel appears, claiming to be from hundreds of years in the future, and that Lightning is alive and in a place called Valhalla. Additionally, various time paradoxes have been occurring, causing out-of-place artefacts to be scattered about. So, Serah and Noel venture out on a journey through time and space, hopping around different areas in the timeline in order to set things right, and find Lightning.

FFXIII-2 seems to have learned at least some lessons from its predecessor. The areas are more open. The combat system is basically the same, though you're given full access to it much earlier on than before, and it now includes some unfortunate but simple QTE-style button pressing events. Newly added is the ability to capture enemies, train them, and have them fight alongside you.

The visuals are still gorgeous and the music is generally excellent. However, the story is still borderline incomprehensible, thanks to all of the timeline hopping, and while Serah and Noel aren't as obnoxious as some of the cast from the first game, they aren't all that likeable either. Altogether, it's mostly a better game than its predecessor, but still something of a mess.

The third game in this sub-series is *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*. Having sat out most of the previous game, Lightning awakens from a centuries-long slumber to a world that is about to be destroyed. The God of Light, Bhunivelze, tasks Lightning with exploring the world and collecting its denizens' souls, so that they may live again in a new world. At the outset, she has six days before the apocalypse, with the clock ticking down in real time. The premise is somewhat similar to tri-Ace's *Valkyrie Profile*, though it's not as heavy on the melodrama, considering that collecting souls usually just involves making people happy by running fetch quests, instead of watching them die tragically.

There's quite a bit of pressure to play the game correctly – indeed, if the original *Final Fantasy XIII* was too linear, this one almost feels too open. There are four large main areas you can explore, which you can conquer in any order, and you can even hop between questlines. However, the time limit is more generous than it initially seems. On normal difficulty, time flows so that an in-game day passes in about an hour in real-time. However, in practice it's actually quite a bit longer, since time doesn't pass in battle or during cutscenes, plus there's an ability which lets you freeze time, and pretty often too. When exploring, you're given a variety of quests, both main storyline and optional ones, and completing storyline quests will extend the time left until the end of the world. In other words, as long as you're not frittering away your time, you probably won't end up failing. And even if you do, there is a New Game+ to carry over progress and try again.

The battle system has changed a bit, since you only control Lightning. Instead of Paradigms, she has three Schemata she can switch between at any time. These not only have unique weaponry but also skill sets. Each also has its own ATB bar, so basically, you attack until one is exhausted, then switch to another while the previous one recharges. Enemies have unique conditions, many revolving around element weaknesses, allowing them to be Staggered. It's a little tough to wrap your head around when you're fighting more than one enemy, but it's still quite a bit of fun. Health also no longer recharges after battles and you can only carry a handful of curatives.

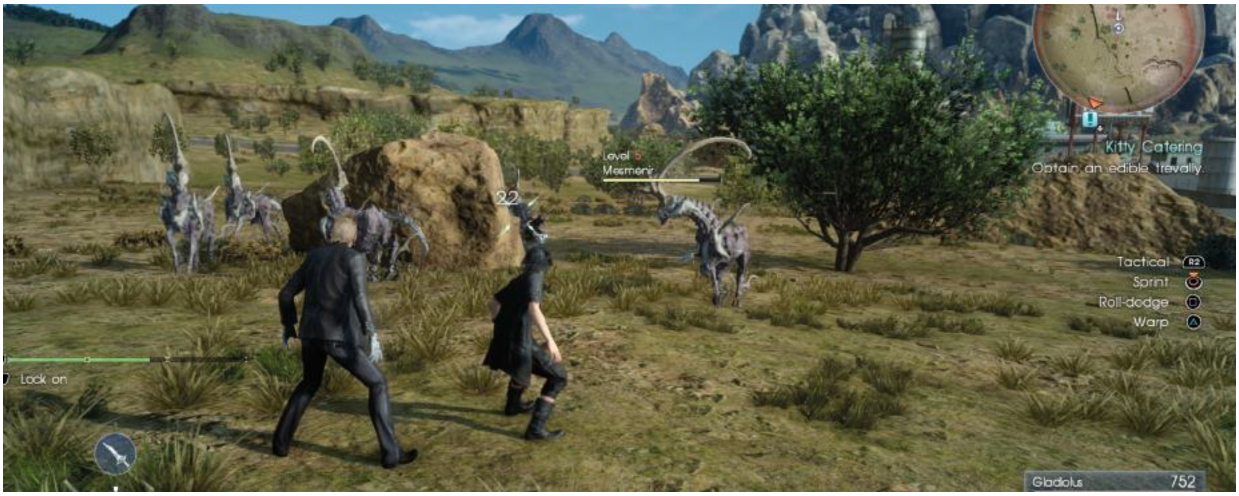
Ultimately, the story is still a complete mess – many characters return but they're radically different from their previous selves, and while Lightning isn't exactly the most interesting character, at least the story is more focused, with less time spent watching tedious cutscenes and more time spent actually doing stuff. While it is weighed down by all of the mishaps of the previous games, and it feels intimidating at first, it's actually a pretty solid RPG in its own right, and it's well worth playing, even for those who didn't care for the first two *Final Fantasy XIII* entries.

***Final Fantasy XIII-2* fixes some of its predecessors more egregious issues, but its storytelling is still a minor disaster.**

Below left is *Final Fantasy XIII-2's* main duo of Serah and Noel, who are less insufferable than the first game's crew. To their right, and below, is *Lightning Returns,* which is more tolerable if mostly because it relegates most of the core cast to the sidelines.

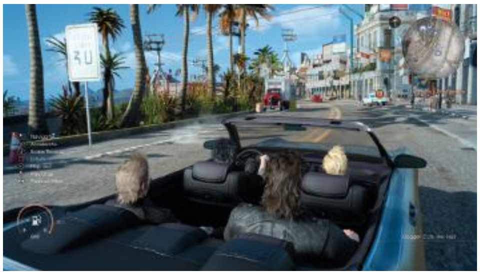
Serah
This is Lightning's knife.
I keep it in my room, but how did it get out here?

PS3
LIGHTNING RETURNS



Final Fantasy XV

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PS4, XB1, WIN, NSW, IOS, AND



PS4
FINAL FANTASY XV
SQUARE ENIX

Prince Noctis of the kingdom of Lucis is engaged to Lunafreya, a political marriage that forms part of a pact between his father and the nation of Niflheim. He and his three buddies set out on a road trip across the country before he says goodbye to his bachelorhood, but things quickly go pear-shaped when Niflheim double-crosses Lucis, kills Noctis' father, and takes the country's magical Crystal for its own. And so Noctis, out in the greater world for the first time, must gather his power to take back his throne and defeat the Imperial army.

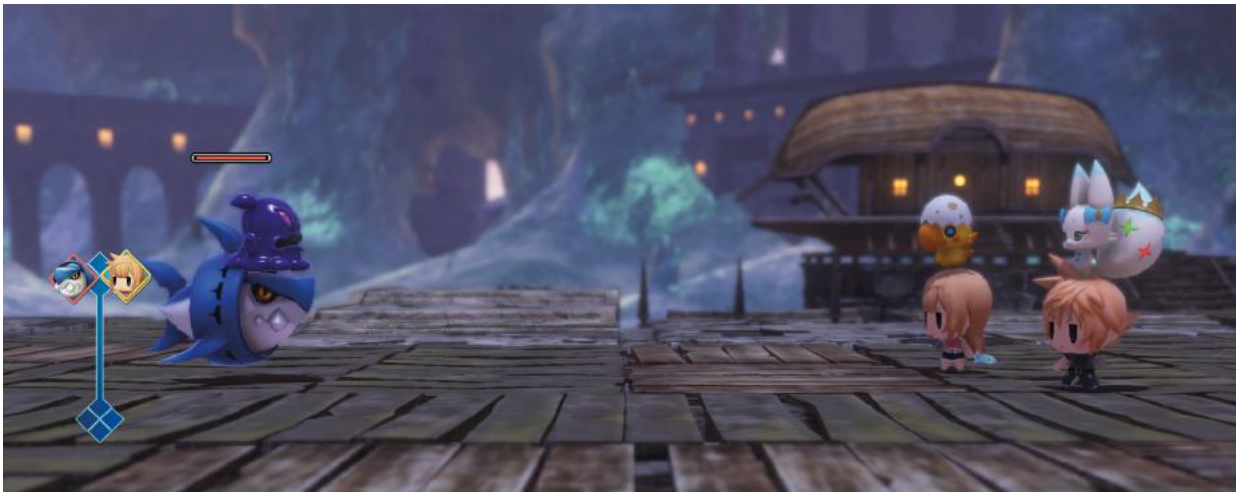
Final Fantasy XV was conceptualised as part of the *Fabula Nova Crystallis* series in 2006, the same project that included *FFXIII* and *FF-Type 0*, though it was in development so long it was eventually spun off as a numbered entry. It makes further changes to the *Final Fantasy* formula, perhaps the biggest being that it's given up any pretence of being turn-based and becomes a full action RPG, the closest equivalent being Square's own *Kingdom Hearts*. Players control Noctis directly; he has a keen warp-strike ability that looks cool but doesn't always work correctly. The CPU controls his three pals – Gladiolus, Ignis and Prompto – who can also be summoned for individual special attacks when the relevant bar has built up enough. It also takes place in a vast open world, and your party members spend a good chunk of time driving around the roads in their fancy car or riding the wilderness on Chocobos.

The series has been distancing itself from pure fantasy for quite a while, but this one feels more real-world than most, because many of the landscapes you drive through don't feel that different from, say, the southwest/midwest United States, right down to American-style diners. But then there are magic structures, mechas, summon creatures and other things typical of the series, and it all feels very incongruous. The open world aspect also feels kinda pointless, because it doesn't feel like there's much to actually do when exploring the wilderness, short of simple sub-quests and whatever diversions the plot takes you on, before it becomes more focused in the game's latter half.

The story suffers from the same basic issues as *Final Fantasy XIII* in that it's an okay plot that suffers from substantial storytelling problems – it's just way too disjointed, and almost requires viewing of the separate *Kingsglaive* movie to really understand it. What sets this one apart is the likeable cast of characters, who share quite lively banter in every situation, from frantic to mundane. It really does nail the "buddy road trip" vibe that it aims for – sailing down the highway listening to classic *Final Fantasy* tunes on the radio has a nice vibe – and that alone helps make up for its deficiencies elsewhere.

Square also developed a *Pocket Edition*, originally for mobile phones, that downscales the visuals greatly, abridges the story, features chibi models for the characters, and removes the open world for a more linear game. This was then ported to other platforms, including other consoles like the Nintendo Switch.

***Final Fantasy XV* was a mess on release, though substantial patches and post-release DLC helped fix up a lot of it, even though there are still some issues.**



World of Final Fantasy

Developer: Square Enix/TOSE | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PS4, XB1, NSW, WIN

***World of Final Fantasy* is only an adequate game, though the super-cutesy characters, goofy writing, and *Final Fantasy* fan service keep it at least somewhat amusing.**

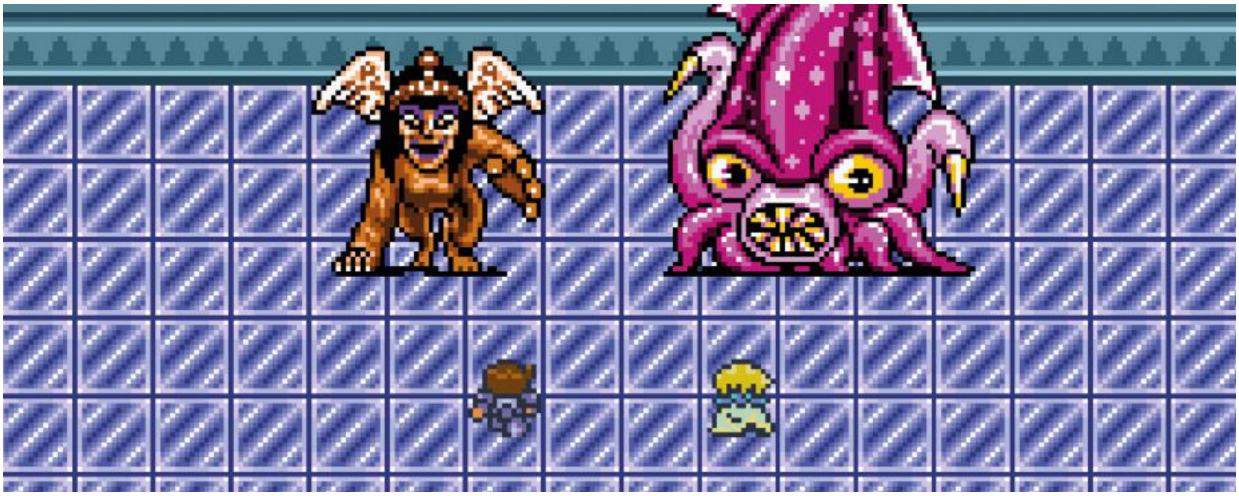
World of Final Fantasy is basically a fan service game, created for the series' 30th anniversary. Taking place in the world of Grymoire, it stars two siblings named Reynn and Lann, who are trying to recover their memories and save the land from the Bahamutian Army. During their adventures, they have run-ins with assorted characters from the *Final Fantasy* games and fight many of their famous monsters, as the story finds various ways to push the nostalgia buttons.

The main characters look like they came out of *Kingdom Hearts*, while most of the rest of the characters are presented as chibi Liliken beings; the light-hearted tone ends up feeling like a *Crystal Chronicles* title. The fighting does hearken back to the 32-bit days, complete with random encounters and the Active Time Battle System, though you can speed up battles with a fast forward button. Here, though, smaller characters can be stacked together to create larger units, bolstering their stats and abilities. However, they can also be toppled, weakening them until they can be reassembled. There are only two main units to control though, which feels like a step back from the old days.

There's a big monster-collecting aspect too; the monsters are called Mirages, and due to the way that they can be stacked together, there's quite a bit of flexibility in how you can approach combat. However, the game seems tuned for beginners, so it's not like it's really all that necessary. Since some Mirages also have field abilities, there are certain spots where you'll need to repeatedly fight until you obtain the necessary one to proceed.

It's a little questionable who this game is actually for. It's too easy for *Final Fantasy* veterans, and while the appearances made by cute versions of all of these characters are amusing, the game doesn't really tap into what actually made the older games so well-loved. Reynn and Lann's story eventually resolves in a touching way, but there's not much to the main cast other than a cutesy-talking Moogle, the story drags in long spots, and most of the classic *Final Fantasy* characters are just involved for a brief period and then shuffle off until the end of the game. At least there's a wider variety of representation than in the fighting game *Final Fantasy Dissidia,* which operated on a similar fan service-type premise, though there's no representation from *Final Fantasy XII.* An updated release called *World of Final Fantasy Maxima* adds a bunch of extra characters and Mirages, and is also available as DLC for the original release.

The cutesy tone and low difficulty also suggest that this game is aimed towards kids, but it does little to explain to new fans why they should care about the older games. There are other things that don't feel quite right – the soundtrack by Masashi Hamauzu is pleasant and some of the remixes are good, but it still doesn't match the feel of the 16- and 32-bit days. On the plus side, some of the dialogue is legitimately funny, as are the database entries for the monsters, which often lean into parody. It's a light and breezy game on its own, but anyone who wants a truly modern-retro game would be better served by *Bravely Default* or *Octopath Traveler.*

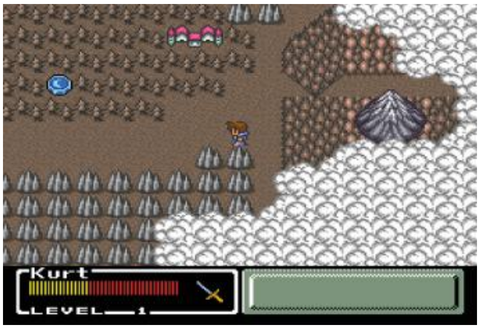


Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest

Developer: Square | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): SNES

Role-playing games like *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* were gigantic hits in Japan through the late ’80s and early ’90s, but they had yet to reach that same level of popularity internationally. The consensus at the time was that they were too complicated for Westerners. There were constant efforts to try to introduce Americans to this type of game, either by creating thorough guides distributed through the *Nintendo Power* magazine, or in the case of *Final Fantasy II*, simply stripping out features and making the game easier. *Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest* was a more concentrated effort to appeal to international markets, being an entry-level RPG marketed at a budget price of 40 USD, about half of what *Final Fantasy II* had cost at retail. The game is known as *Final Fantasy USA: Mystic Quest* in Japan.

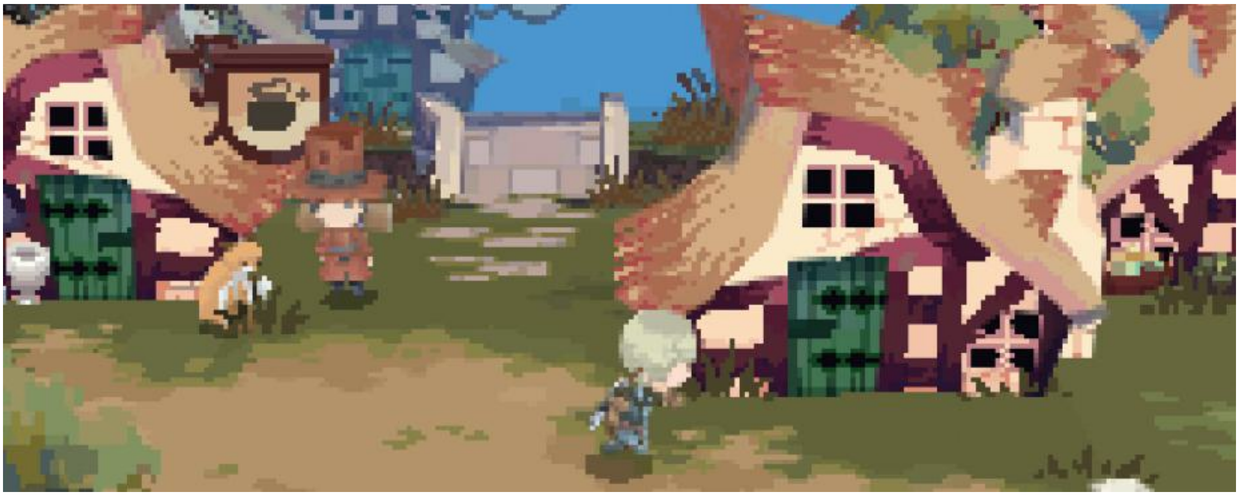
The story is pretty basic, essentially an adolescent version of a *Final Fantasy* game; you name your protagonist (canon names: Benjamin in English or Zash in Japanese), then he sets off to find the four elemental crystals needed to save the world. There are only two party members max, with various helper characters that jump in and out to occupy the second slot. Only the hero gains experience points and equips items; each new piece of equipment automatically supersedes the last, magic spells are doled out at appropriate points in the story, and gold is mostly just used to buy curative items. There are three types of magic spell – Black, White, and Wizard – and as in the original *Final Fantasy*, you can only cast any one class of spell a certain number of times before you need to rest. By default, hit points are measured by a meter, but this can be changed to a standard numerical display. The battle system is completely turn-based and shown from an overhead perspective.



Visually, the sprites look like *Final Fantasy* ones, but the game actually has more in common with the Game Boy game *Final Fantasy Legend III* (a.k.a. *SaGa 3*), as it was designed by some of the same team at Square’s branch in Osaka, composed of former XtalSoft staff. The hero can jump, rare for an RPG, plus there are various items, like axes and claws, that can be used to cut down trees or scale walls. While there’s an overworld map, you can’t explore freely, and instead travel on paths to your destinations. There are no random encounters, so enemies appear on the map, completely stationary, until you defeat them. Combat is easy, but if you do get killed you can simply restart the battle with no penalty, and you can save anywhere. The script is incredibly brief, and the story is not only basic but rather silly, obviously being aimed at kids.

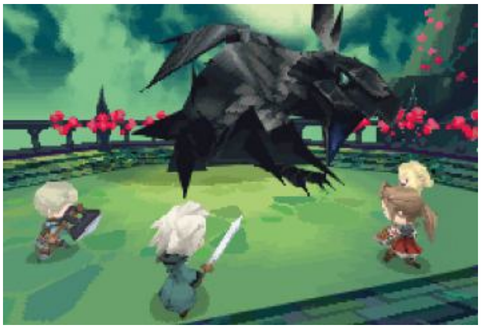
Mystic Quest fulfils its goal of being a beginner RPG, but it’s also simple to the point where anyone beyond its target audience will find it boring. Nowadays, it’s mostly remembered for Ryuji Sasai and Yasuhiro Kawakami’s excellent soundtrack, which is almost as good as those in the core SNES games.

***Mystic Quest* was part of the early campaign to get Americans and Europeans to play Japanese RPGs, advertising itself as “entry-level”.**



Final Fantasy: The 4 Heroes of Light

Developer: Square/Matrix | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): DS



***The 4 Heroes of Light* is a retro throwback to the 8-bit age, although that's an era that not many Western JRPG fans have a lot of nostalgia for.**

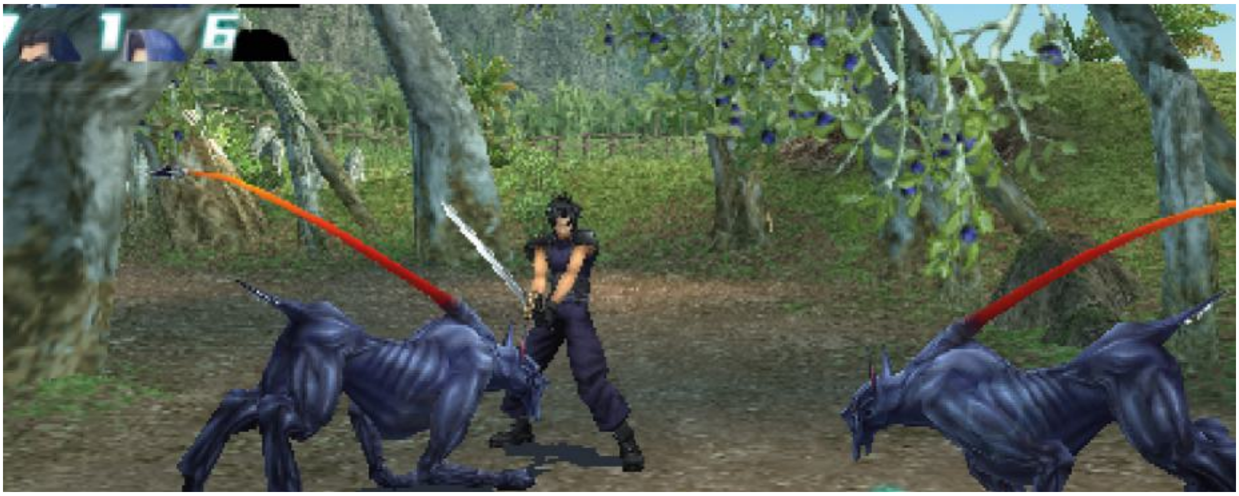
The DS ports of *Final Fantasy III* and *IV* were developed by a company called Matrix, who were handed the keys to the franchise to create their own spinoff title. This game, *Final Fantasy: The 4 Heroes of Light*, harks back to the Famicom days of the franchise, though done with (then) modern tech. As expected of games from times of old, the story and characterisation are pretty straightforward, as four warriors come together to save the world from peril. From there, the heroes split off into pairs and have their own adventures, often finding temporary companions to flesh out their ranks. Halfway through the game, the heroes finally join up again to revisit all of the old areas and solve new quests.

The developers' choices as to which aspects to update, and which to keep, were a little unusual. Some elements are actually a little closer to the *Dragon Quest* series, like the day-night cycle, the way the party members march in line on the field, and the per-character inventory limit. Since there's not much in the way of cutscenes, you need to spend some time talking to the villagers to identify each next goal, as the direction can be quite vague. And indeed, you need to be properly equipped for most battles, and it's impossible to get this right ahead of time unless you're following a guide. The biggest point of contention in this game is the auto-targetting system. When attacking, you cannot choose your foe; when healing, you cannot choose your ally. Instead, it's up to the game to determine the best course of action, and it doesn't always get it right. On the plus side, this makes the pacing fairly breezy.

The character development system is similar to the Job system from *Final Fantasy III*. Here, you can wear Crowns to grant you new abilities, which can be upgraded by finding certain types of gem. There are 27 Crowns, each with varying levels of ability. These aren't permanently attached to your character, though, and disappear when you swap Crowns. Enemy level scaling is implemented in the second half of the game, so it's more important to develop your Crowns than your levels. Magic isn't learned either, and is instead determined by any spellbooks you have in your possession.

Visually, it most resembles the *Final Fantasy III* remake, right down to the Akihiko Yoshida character designs. In spite of the low resolution on the DS, it has a bright and charming look, and certain areas, like the towns, appear as you're running around a globe, as in *Animal Crossing*. The music has a pleasant retro chiptune feel, with some more modern instrumentation mixed in, and it's quite good.

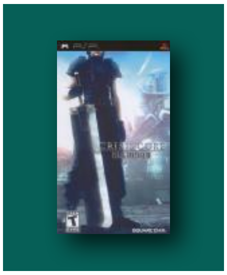
The 4 Heroes of Light runs into the same issue as *Final Fantasy III*, the game that it most closely resembles – much as that is overshadowed by *Final Fantasy V*, this game just ends up feeling like a prototype for its spiritual successor, *Bravely Default*. It still has a unique vibe, as long as you're okay with its many quirks.



Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): PSP

What's going on, Angeal?
Why are we fighting Shinra troops?



Of all of the spinoffs to result from the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* project, the best was *Crisis Core*, a PSP prequel starring Zack, Cloud's buddy from SOLDIER. Zack wasn't exactly a major character in *Final Fantasy VII,* but this game makes him an excellent protagonist, particularly since he became Cloud's role model and personal hero. The story begins with Zack as an aspiring mid-rank warrior, investigating some fellow team members who have gone rogue. There are some minor characters, like Tifa, Yuffie, Aeris, and Tseng (from the Turks), while both Cloud and Sephiroth play more integral roles. Seeing them before the events of *Final Fantasy VII* paints a clearer picture of that game's story, especially since so much of it was told through the lens of an unreliable narrator. Zack's also a great character, a fine contrast to the dour heroes that tended to be thrust into the spotlight in this era of games. Unfortunately anyone who's familiar with *Final Fantasy VII* knows that he meets a tragic end, and the events of this game make those moments all the more powerful.

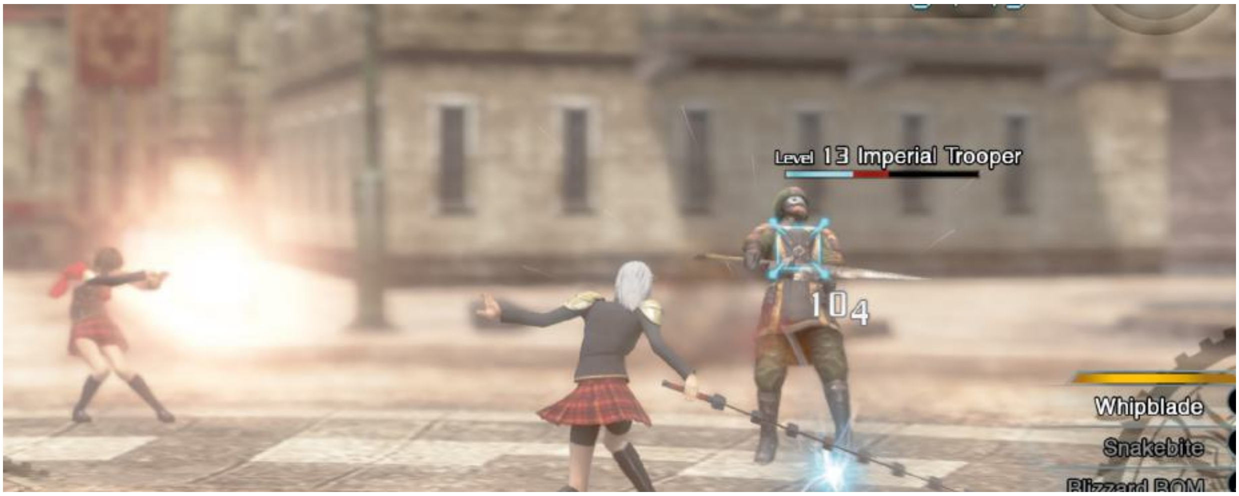
All the aspects not tied directly to *Final Fantasy VII* are more questionable, particularly the antagonist, Genesis, an irritating rogue SOLDIER member who's based on J-rock idol Gackt, and whose sole character trait is quoting a poem called "Loveless". There is some retconning, in the form of elements never mentioned in *FFVII,* though, and some parts don't feel like they fit.

The game also shifts to a real-time battle system, with Zack being the only playable character. Players select Materia and items by using the D-pad, as in *Kingdom Hearts.* Hitting the "attack" button doesn't directly attack, but rather commands Zack to run to the closest targetted enemy and then attack them, a bit like the older *Tales* games. Not only does it introduce a weird, if short, lag, it makes things a little too easy, since you just need to mash the attack button and then occasionally dodge. There's also a slot machine called the DMW (Digital Mind Wave), meant to represent Zack's thoughts, which randomly gives status enhancements and special attacks. It's unpredictable, plus it disrupts the action for several seconds, which ruins the pacing. The game is also pretty linear, as Zack is led from mission to mission. There are 300 side missions, if you want to bust some time and gain some extra stuff, but the story mode clocks in at less than 15 hours, a good length for this type of story.

The visuals are improved over *FFVII,* with everything rendered in polygons. The character models are fantastic, though the environments are drab, although it is cool to revisit areas from *FFVII.* The voice acting is excellent, and the rocking soundtrack by Takeharu Ishimoto includes several excellent original songs along with numerous remixes of classic tunes.

Those who weren't enamoured of *Final Fantasy VII* will find almost nothing here. But the fan service, along with Zack's inherent likeability and the excellent music, help *Crisis Core* overcome its other issues.

The drab dungeons and random elements in the battle system are a little annoying, but Zack is a great character, and the story expands the *Final Fantasy VII* universe in (mostly) good ways.



Final Fantasy Type-0

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2011 | Platform(s): PSP, PS4, WIN

Final Fantasy Type-0 is the second of the *Fabula Nova Crystallis* sub-series, though it doesn't share much of anything with its forebear, *Final Fantasy XIII*. It does, however, have many of the traditional elements of the *Final Fantasy* series. The story focuses on the continent of Orience, where four kingdoms are locked in a war over the power of elemental crystals. There are Eidolons and there are l'Cie, there are Chocobos that you can breed and Moogles that give out mission objectives. You control members of the elite Class Zero, part of a military school called the Vermillion Peristylium, similar to *Final Fantasy VIII*'s SeeD, although this story concerns fighting in wars and attending classes, rather than the direction taken by *FFVIII*.

For the most part, the *Final Fantasy* games have done a good job of establishing their main characters and using their conflicts to help explain the world around them. Unfortunately, *Type-0* falls victim to the type of narrative disasters found in the *Final Fantasy XIII* games, and in some ways it's even worse. The story begins with a gigantic cutscene infodump, before Class Zero is sent into the fray. There are 14 class-members in total, 12 based on various card suits, plus two more, Rem and Machina, who are ostensibly the protagonists. But you're not introduced to any of the team members, or any of the characters, really, so it's hard to care about any of it. The school uniform designs are pretty cool, especially their distinctive red capes, but most of them could just as well be tossed together using a "create a character" function. It's also violent for a *Final Fantasy* game, as evidenced by its Mature rating.

Much of the game is split between attending the school, which you can explore to run side quests, and running actual missions. Unlike *Crisis Core*, it has a small overworld, where you can venture between cities. This also acts as a battlefield for some simple real-time strategy battles, in which you can command and fight alongside forces to take various territories.

Also like *Crisis Core*, it has a battle system that's entirely real-time. You control a single character, with two others, controlled by AI, in active combat, and the rest in reserve. Each character has their own unique fighting style – swords, guns, musical instruments, playing cards, chain whips, etc. – so there's a lot of variety, but combat feels weightless and unfun. The environments are repetitive, and while the story eventually does go in the sort of crazy directions you expect from a *Final Fantasy* game, the bad storytelling makes it hard to be invested.

Type-0 initially began as a PSP game only released in Japan, and didn't hit the international markets until 2015, when it was released on the PlayStation 4 and Windows. However, it looks terrible when blown up to HD resolution, and the bite-sized chunk structure doesn't feel right outside of a portable setting. Overall, there's a lot of cool ideas here, but very little of it is executed well. At least the soundtrack by Takeharu Ishimoto, which features a hummable leitmotif and some dramatic orchestrations, is brilliant.

PS4
FINAL FANTASY 零式

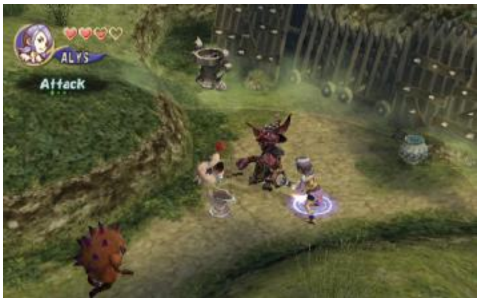
For a few years, *Type-0* was another "lost" *Final Fantasy* game for the international market, hyped up by importers. At least until the HD release, at which point people got to play it and wondered what all the fuss was about.

Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles

Developer: Square | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): GC, DS, WII, PS4, NSW, IOS, AND

In the early 2000s, Square was in a bit of a pickle. *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* was a colossal flop in cinemas and this put a serious dent in the companies' finances. Revenues from games on Sony's successful, but demanding, home systems were coming in, but other income streams went missing. Although Square supported Bandai's Wonderswan, that system was quickly steam-rollered by Nintendo's Game Boy Advance. After spectacularly burning all bridges to Nintendo by releasing *Final Fantasy VII* on the PlayStation, the GBA, a potentially perfect system for lucrative 16-bit ports, was out of reach. However, Nintendo wasn't too averse to having some nice Square-RPGs, and an agreement was reached: Square could develop for the Game Boy Advance – but also on the GameCube, please. A separate studio was repurposed to circumvent an exclusivity deal with Sony: using a Nintendo developer fund, The Game Designers Studio, owned 49% by Square and 51% by *SaGa* creator Akitoshi Kawazu, was going to develop a game for Nintendo's beautifully angular home system.

That game, the only one Square ever produced for the GameCube, is *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* and it would be the game that strayed farthest from the established *Final Fantasy* formula in terms of presentation, storytelling and game design, although it maintained the expected quality. While Akitoshi Kawazu served as producer, many veterans from *Final Fantasy IX* were involved in the game's creation, among them Kazuhiko Aoki (director), Toshiyuki Itahana (character designer), and Masahiro Kataoka (event planner). The soundtrack was primarily composed by Kumi Tanioka, using instruments from the renaissance and medieval periods; the intro song "Kaze No Ne" was performed by Yae Fujimoto in Japanese and Donna Burke in English.



NINTENDO GAMECUBE
FINAL FANTASY
CRYSTAL CHRONICLES

While Square kept the mainline single-player *Final Fantasy* games on the PlayStation 2, the GameCube got this cute little multiplayer spinoff.

While *Crystal Chronicles* keeps some key elements of the main series, such as spell nomenclature and monster designs, everything else is a huge departure. The game eschews RPG elements; there's no levelling system, no magic points, player energy is measured in little hearts, and instead of using turn-based battles, *Crystal Chronicles* feels more like an action adventure. There are four new races: the human-like Clavat, the beastly Selkie, the small, but powerful Lilty, and the magically-inclined Yuke, from which the player chooses and names their character. The game has a clear focus on multiplayer dynamics – easily the most controversial element, since you couldn't just invite friends over and plug in some additional controllers. Instead, every player needs a Game Boy Advance connected to the GameCube via link cable, a complex setup that nevertheless works beautifully when complete. Every player has information they can share with others: monsters' weaknesses and level maps are displayed on individual screens, just like the secret objectives for every player that decide who gets the first pick of the loot after a level is finished.

Still, the concept was hard to communicate to the audience, especially since many reviewers of the day complained about the cost of buying not only the game, but also four GBA systems and link cables. Another controversial element is the crystal chalice, more commonly known as "the bucket". Since the world is shrouded in poisonous miasma, each party has to carry around a chalice to ward of the poison – a clever gameplay device used to keep the players close together. Solo adventures are accompanied by a Moogle carrying said chalice; in multiplayer groups however, one character always has to carry the chalice, and must put it down before joining the battle.

In spite of all these idiosyncrasies, *Crystal Chronicles* sold pretty well, and has found quite a few fans, leading not only to a remaster on current-gen hardware, but also a handful of sequels on Nintendo DS and Wii.

The first of these sequels, *Ring of Fates*, was released on Nintendo DS in 2007. It's a prequel to the original game, taking place thousands of years before the miasma covered the land. The handheld adventure puts a much larger emphasis on story and characters, and classical RPG elements like experience points are present as well. Typically for DS games of this vintage, there are some touch-screen shenanigans involved: it's possible to switch the main screen between upper and lower screen in order to initiate attacks via stylus. The game was directed by Mitsuru Kamiyama, who served as the main programmer in the first game. He also directed the second sequel, released in 2009 and subtitled *Echoes of Time*, which is pretty similar to *Ring of Fates*, but puts a larger emphasis on multiplayer action, allowing local co-op between DS and Wii players. The latter version is an interesting case: instead of utilising the much stronger Wii hardware, *Echoes of Time* uses the same graphical assets as the DS game and puts the two handheld screens into two separate windows.

A crystal bearer! How horrid!

For Nintendo's WiiWare service, Square produced two spinoffs titled *My Life as a King* (2008) and *My Life as a Dark Lord* (2009). Both veer more towards strategy and base- or kingdom-building and are considered some of the most complex games on the service. The first one also got a browser-based companion-game called *My Life as a King - Everyone's Kingdom.*

The series would come to an end in 2009 with *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: The Crystal Bearers*, a single-player game for the Nintendo Wii, taking place long after the GameCube episode and eschewing the cute art style of previous games in favour of more naturally proportioned characters. Initially intended as a bold, free-roaming adventure, the Wii's success among non-hardcore gamers led the team to aim the game at more casual players and implement typical Wii features like WiiMote aiming. Despite nice presentation and a good plot, middling reviews and poor sales put a premature end to the *Crystal Chronicles* series.

Wii
FINAL FANTASY

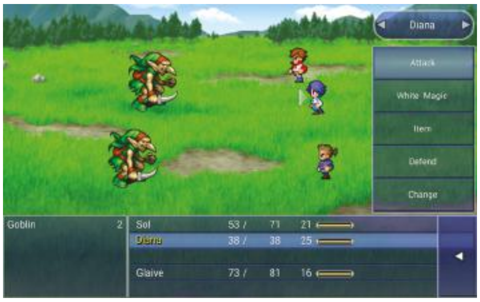
The *Crystal Bearers* for the Nintendo Wii was almost nothing like the GameCube game that spawned it, and while it's decent, it also failed to take off.

Final Fantasy Dimensions

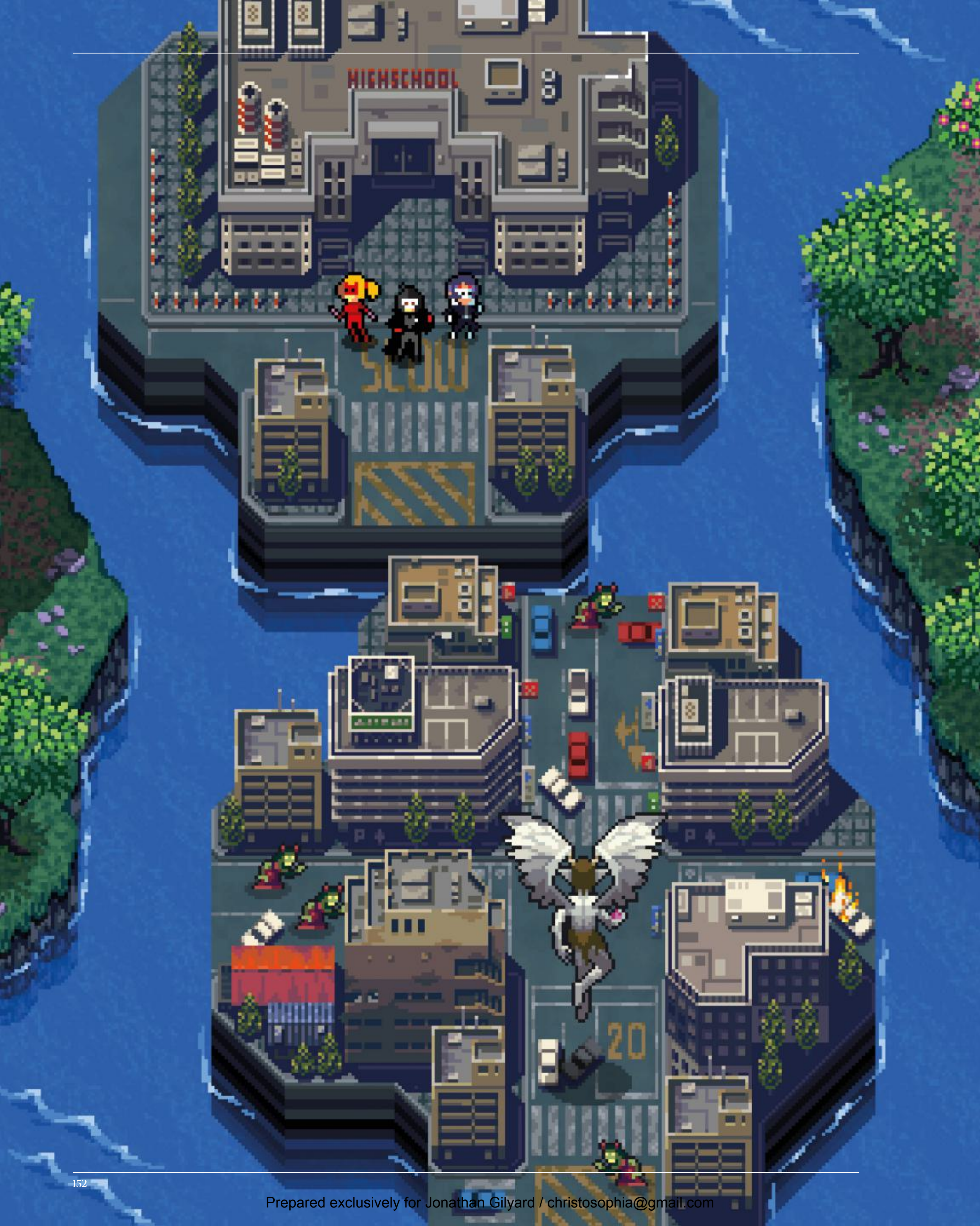
Developer: Square | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): MOB, IOS, AND

In addition to porting some of their older games to mobile platforms, Square also tinkered with new entries done in a retro style. After the unnecessary sequel *Final Fantasy IV: The After Years*, they decided to create an original game called *Final Fantasy Dimensions*. While it's an original game, the gameplay and general style are based on the SNES *Final Fantasy* games, even using the fan-favourite Job system from *Final Fantasy V*. You control two parties, the Warriors of Light and the Warriors of Dark, each of whom have their own Jobs to choose from. The story and characters are not particularly noteworthy, and the ugly sprites and high-resolution visuals of the smartphone ports (the only versions released in English) are terrible, giving it an amateur *RPG Maker*-style vibe. But the soundtrack is pretty good, and it still functions well as a nostalgic throwback.

The sequel is almost entirely unrelated, as it originally started as a free-to-play social RPG before being retooled into a product for purchase. It's a little more modern-looking, but the focus is almost entirely on battles, so it feels much less like a classic RPG. It was directed by Takashi Tokita, one of the vets from the old days, and its story was based on the concept for *Chrono Break*, a discarded sequel to *Chrono Trigger*, but ultimately, it's nothing too interesting



They're not a patch on the old games, but these mobile phone games at least provide new adventures.


HIGHSCHOOL
SLOW
20

Shin Megami Tensei and Persona

In 1986, Aya Nishitani wrote a novel called *Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei* ("Goddess Reincarnation"), a story about opening the gates of the demon world using computers. It's a little cheesy, in the same way that Stephen King horror stories can be, but played to the anxieties people had about the new-fangled technology, and spawned numerous multimedia tie-ins.

One of these tie-ins was a Famicom game by Atlus, a company that was just getting its start in game development. The staff were fans of 3D PC dungeon crawlers like *Wizardry*, and decided to make a similar game using the *Megami Tensei* licence. Playing as the human characters, Akemi or Yumiko, players could also talk to the many enemy demons and potentially recruit them into their party, then fuse multiple demons together to make new and stronger creations. It was popular enough, and thus spawned a sequel, *Megami Tensei II*, that took place in a post-apocalyptic Tokyo overrun by demons, while the rest of humanity tried to eke out an existence under their rule. Another sequel was released on the Super Famicom, now called *Shin Megami Tensei* ("True Goddess Reincarnation"), a key point in one of Japan's longest-running RPG series.

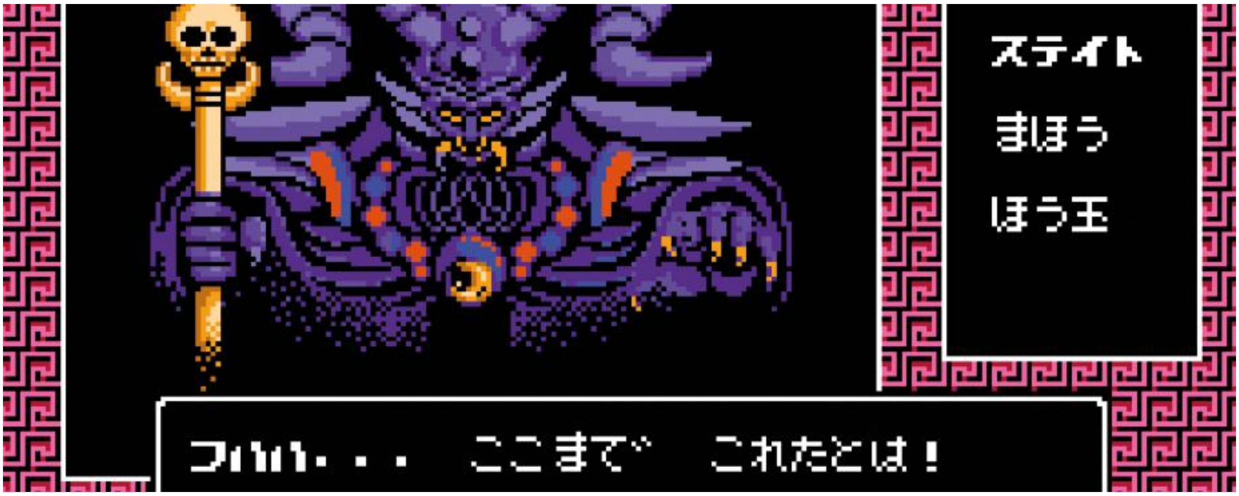
Within this novel post-apocalyptic setting, the developers were keen to experiment with a number of themes, creating a large number of spinoffs. The 32-bit *Devil Summoner* games take place in modern Japan, and have you controlling a small squad of paranormal detectives. The PlayStation 2 *Devil Summoner* series is a spinoff of a spinoff, using a similar concept but set in 1930s Tokyo. *Majin Tensei* is a strategy RPG series similar to *Fire Emblem* and *Front Mission*; the much later *Devil Survivor* is similar, but closer to *Tactics Ogre* in style. *Last Bible* takes place in a fantasy medieval setting, while *DemiKids* is basically *Shin Megami Tensei* mixed with *Pokémon*. *Shin Megami Tensei if...* featured regular high school students instead of cyberpunk warriors, which in turn sparked another sub-series, *Persona*.

While it took a while to catch on, the *Persona* series achieved international success with its third entry, which mixed up social elements and dungeon crawling. It's now reached the point where *Persona* is much more popular than the series that spawned it, much to the chagrin of long-time fans.

Of course, it took a long time for any of these games to be released outside of Japan at all. Role-playing games were hard sells in the Western console markets in the late '80s/early '90s, doubly so in this case, given the first-person dungeon crawling and complicated demon-breeding mechanics. The core concept of the series is that every figure from every world mythology or religion co-exist, which means that trickster god Loki could hang out with biblical devil Lucifer. This could have been an issue in countries like the United States, or other regions with a strong religious population, that might view this as blasphemy – it doesn't help that Christian angels are routinely characterised as villains. Some of the spinoffs, like *Revelations: Demon Slayer* for the Game Boy and *Persona* for the PlayStation, were released in the '90s; it wasn't until 2004 that the first core game in the series, *Shin Megami Tensei Nocturne* (known as *Lucifer's Call* in Europe), saw international release.

For quite a while the key people leading the series were programmer/designer Kouji "Cozy" Okada, and artist/designer Kazuma Kaneko. However, in the mid-2000s, their involvement diminished, as direction was passed to Katsura Hashino, a planner who worked on some of the 16-bit games, as well as artists Shigenori Soejima and Masayuki Doi. Kaneko continues to be credited on many games, mostly because even newer titles reuse his demon designs, some of which have become iconic over the years. Every RPG has its mascot – *Dragon Quest* has the slime, *Final Fantasy* has the Chocobos and the Moogles – so *Shin Megami Tensei* and *Persona* have Jack Frost, a little snowman in a blue jester's outfit, along with several other similar themed family members.

Embracing their identity as post-apocalyptic cyberpunk, the initial *Shin Megami Tensei* games are quite a bit darker than other RPGs of the time.



フハハハ・・・ ここまで これたとは！

Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei

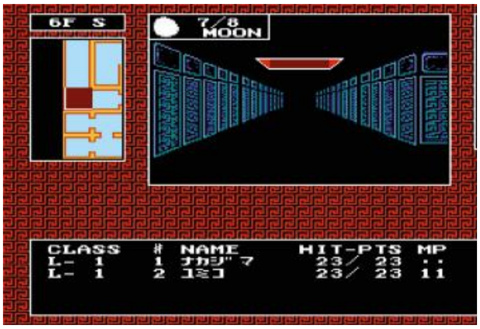
Developer: Atlus | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): FC, SFC, MOB

In the original *Megami Tensei*, a palace called Devilpolis has risen from the ground. Its master, Lucifer, has kidnapped the goddess Izanami. Akemi Nakajima, a brilliant high school student who has the power to summon demons with his computer, joins up with classmate Yumiko Shirasagi to save her.

This being the first entry in the series, *Megami Tensei* hadn't yet developed many of the thematic elements it would later be known for. At the outset, the story is pretty threadbare, and the emphasis is entirely on dungeon crawling and demon recruitment. You can customise Nakajima's and Shirasagi's stats at the beginning, though while Nakajima can summon demons, he can't use magic. Unlike a typical *Wizardry* dungeon, the Devilpolis isn't a straight line from the beginning to end, but rather a labyrinth divided into sections, which are connected at certain points. Each of these areas is ruled by a different mythological figure – you'll run up against the Minotaur, Medusa, Loki, Hecate, and Seth before the ultimate fight against Lucifer himself. If you die, the boss of the area taunts you in the game-over screen.

There are two consumable resources you need to keep track of. Macca is the currency of the demon realm, and in addition to being used at shops, is needed to summon demons. Magnetite is the "fuel" for demons, which is consumed at every step, based on how many are in your party, to discourage you from running around with too many powerful characters at once. You also collect jewels, which can be used to restore health or in bargaining. There's also a moon cycle, which determines things like demon behaviour.

There's a lot of roughness due to its age. The in-game conversation is pretty simple but also relies a lot on luck, and it can be tough to even get your first recruit. You can only fight one type of demon at a time, though they often appear in groups. The only automap is a spell called Mapper, which only shows your immediate surroundings. And since this is a cartridge game that predates battery backup saves, you record your progress with a password.



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CLASS   #  NAME       HIT-PTS  MP
L- 1    1  ナカジ゛マ    23/ 23  ..
L- 1    2  ユミコ       23/ 23  11
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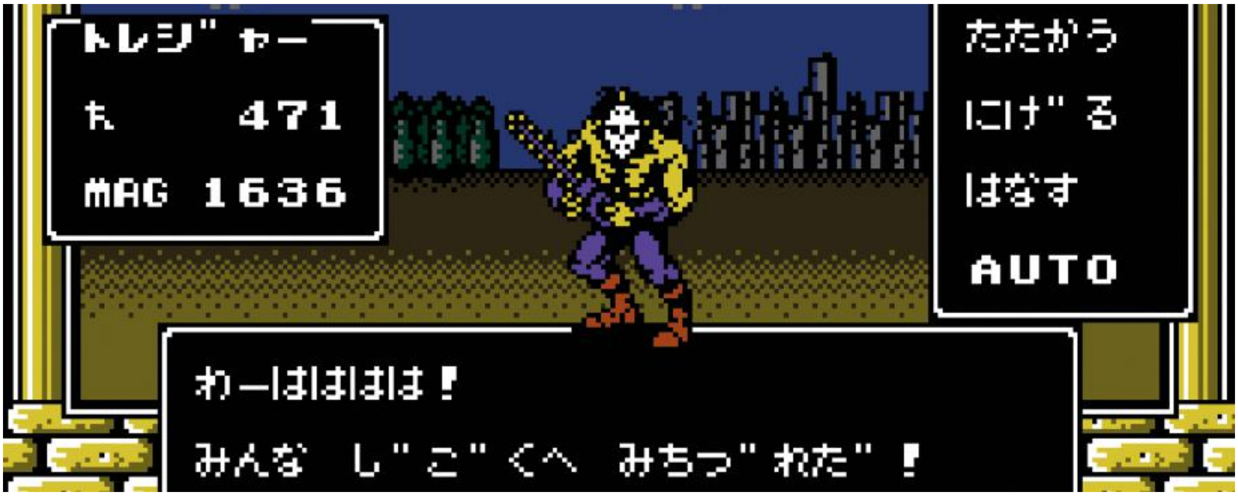
The visuals are simple, but they have a strong identity compared to typical dungeon crawlers of the time, especially with the strange shopkeepers (one of whom looks like a twisted version of Yoda from *Star Wars*) and interesting character designs. The music by Tsukasa Masuko is pretty catchy too. It's a little tough to play nowadays, but it is interesting to see where many of the classical ideas of the series took root.

While Atlus developed this game for the Famicom, Telenet put out their own version for Japanese computers. It's a completely different game using a similar premise, being an overhead action RPG that looks like the arcade game *Gauntlet*. There's no demon recruitment, and you only control Nakajima, as you explore two gigantic towers. It's an interesting alternate take, but Atlus' version is historically more important.

namcot
デジタル・デビル物語 女神転生
デジタル・デビル物語
女神転生

Akemi and Yumiko, reincarnations of the husband-and-wife creation gods Izanagi and Izanami, fight against Loki and other mythological figures in the establishing entry of this series.



わーははは！
みんな じごくへ みちづれだ！

Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei II

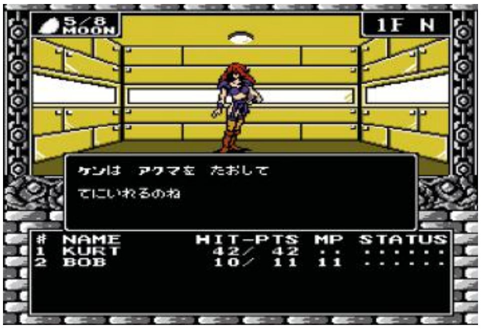
Developer: Atlus | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): FC, SFC, MOB

Megami Tensei II begins with a nuclear explosion, which destroys most of the planet and drives the humans underground. After creating your characters – yourself, your best friend, and the heroine – it then shifts to a game-within-a-game called Devil Busters, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the original *Megami Tensei*. Once you beat the Minotaur, the first boss, you are greeted by Pazuzu, who grants you the power to speak to demons, and commands you to fight against the creatures that rule Tokyo. After your character and your buddy leave their bunker, they meet the heroine, who is shunned by the rest of the populace as a witch. She warns that Pazuzu is actually tricking them – the hero believes her, but his friend does not, and abandons the team to fight alone, eventually becoming an enemy.

While the first Famicom game set down the basic conventions of the series – mythological demons, demon negotiation, and so forth – it's in this entry that the *Megami Tensei* franchise really found its voice, with its focus on post-apocalyptic Tokyo, as well as the moral quandaries that come with being heralded as the Messiah and the saviour of the human race. It's also a much larger game, with an actual overworld to explore, linking the many real-world locations, dungeons, and towns, plus a second overworld within the Makai (demon realm). While the series had yet to introduce the Law-Neutral-Chaos alignment paths (that doesn't happen until the following game), the way that the friend turns against the player anticipates these dynamics. There are two competing factions though – the Christianity-like Order of Messiah, and the chaotic Deva Cult. There is also an important plot branch midway through the game – after fighting Bael, you can choose to kill him or spare him. If you spare him, it will open up a path to a longer endgame, culminating in fights against both Satan and YHVH, otherwise known as Yahweh. The concept of defeating the creator is common in JRPGs, but here you are literally fighting the Abrahamic God, represented as a floating blue head.

The graphics have been enhanced considerably over the dingy corridors of Devilpolis, though the colour scheme is perhaps a little too bright in some areas. The cartridge uses the Namco 163 mapper chip, which gives a richer sound to the already fantastic soundtrack. While it's still a tough game – many negotiations can go wrong, after which enemies call for back-up that can overwhelm you – but the fascinating setting, compelling story, and excellent music create one of the best RPGs of the 8-bit era.

Both of the Famicom games were remade together and bundled on a single cartridge for the Super Famicom, dubbed *Kyuuyaku Megami Tensei* ("New Testament Megami Tensei"). While they're decent ports, they do mimic the aesthetic of the other SFC *Shin Megami Tensei* games, so the unique aesthetics of the original 8-bit platform are lost.



ケンは アクマを たおして
てにいれるのね

```
# NAME        HIT-PTS  MP  STATUS
1 KURT          42/ 42  ..  ......
2 BOB           10/ 11  11  ......
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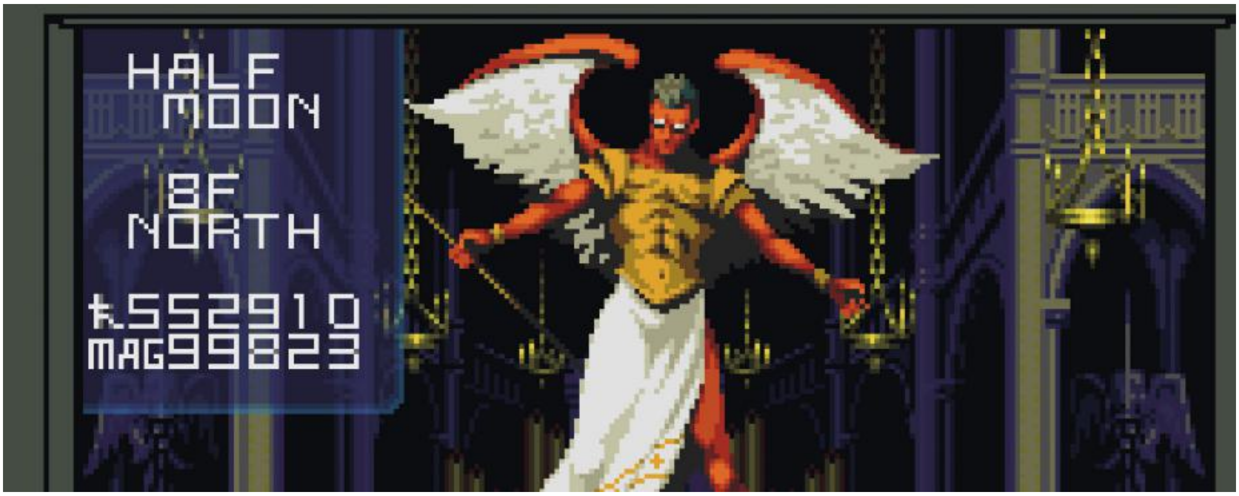
namcot
デジタル・デビル物語
女神転生II

***Megami Tensei II* is like a Japanese version of Western RPGs like *Wasteland* or *Fallout*, though with the addition of tons of mythical beasts.**

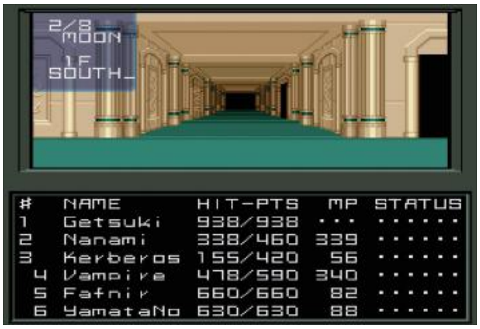


Shin Megami Tensei

Developer: Atlus | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): SFC, PCECD, MCD, PS1, GBA, IOS

Megami Tensei II showed us post-apocalyptic Tokyo, while its Super Famicom sequel ponders the events that would lead up to such a cataclysm. The story in *Shin Megami Tensei* begins with a day like any other, except weird things are happening … disappearances, creature sightings, your mother being eaten by a demon, and so forth. The hero is visited by a mysterious man in a wheelchair, who is basically Stephen Hawking, and given a device that allows them to communicate with demons, and befriend the monsters that have begun to overun the city. But soon things get out of control, with a zealot named Gotou staging a coup, and then Japan being annihilated by missiles in order to contain the demon outbreak. Time fasts forward as the hero ventures through a devastated Tokyo; he must now lead humanity down a new path.

One of the key elements of *Megami Tensei II* was the (pre-determined) dynamic between the hero, the heroine, and the friend. Instead, in *Shin Megami Tensei*, there are three different alignments you can follow, determined by assorted actions: Law, Chaos, and Neutral. At a certain point in the game, the story splits off into three directions, allying you or putting you at odds with various factions, as well as some of your former companions, plus it determines the types of demon who will join you. The game also plays a few tricks on you before it reveals which of the various women is the true heroine. Some basic plot elements are similar to its predecessor's – there are two main competing factions, the (Law-oriented) Messians and their counterparts the (Chaos-oriented) Ring of Gaea, and various humans are actually demons in disguise, which became a recurring thing throughout the series. The various philosophies present give much more depth and ambiguity to the post-apocalyptic world … even though the "best" ending is usually the Neutral one, which also ends up being the hardest.



```
#   NAME      HIT-PTS   MP  STATUS
1   Getsuki   938/938  ···  ·······
2   Nanami    338/460  339  ·······
3   Kerberos  155/420   56  ·······
 4  Vampire   478/590  340  ·······
 5  Fafnir    660/660   82  ·······
 6  YamataNo  630/630   88  ·······
```

The move to the Super Famicom has given the game a graphical punch, with a darker colour palette that feels more appropriate than the gaudy colours of the 8-bit games, and the electric guitar samples do wonders for the soundtrack. Elsewhere, it's still a little rough – demon conversation is fairly simple, you can still only fight one type of enemy at a time, the balance is pretty wonky, and the map screen is buried deep within a menu. Still, it's an all-time classic, with a compelling story and oppressive atmosphere that's mighty impressive for an early SFC release.

Shin Megami Tensei received a number of ports, with the Mega CD and PlayStation versions offering smooth scrolling compared to the SFC's choppy movement. The only officially released English version was for iOS, and it's more or less a straight port of the Game Boy Advance version using the upgraded soundtrack of the PlayStation release. While the interface is cumbersome with a touch screen, it's workable. Unfortunately it's incompatible with newer iOS versions.

ATLUS
真·女神転生

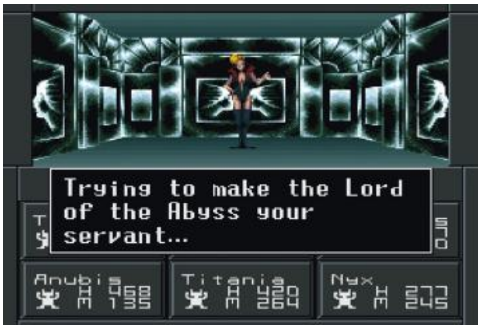
The artwork for the Super Famicom version is iconic, showing the many demons that you can command, towering over their human counterparts.

Shin Megami Tensei II

Developer: Atlus | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SFC, PS1, GBA, IOS

In the Neutral ending of the first *Shin Megami Tensei,* the hero decides to create a world where people can live and worship as they please. Fast-forward to several decades later, when *Shin Megami Tensei II* starts. Unfortunately, things didn't quite work out as planned, and things are far from peaceful – the Law-abiding Messians and Chaos-following Gaeans are at war with each other. A new city, Tokyo Millennium, has been built upon the ravaged ruins of old Tokyo, and there's a sharp class division – the holy priests of the Center, and the slums of Valhalla.

Things are not so good in Valhalla, where gigantic TV screens tell of demon invasions like they were weather forecasts. It is here that we meet our hero, a man with no name or memory, and your character. A washed up fighter finds you fighting demons, takes you under his care, names you Hawk, and trains you to become the best gladiator in Valhalla. Alas, your career is cut short when you receive a message from the Center – you are actually the Messiah, whose true name is Aleph, and whose true destiny is to save the world and lead everyone to paradise. As you get used to the role of Messiah by doing the usual RPG good guy stuff – saving villages, running fetch quests, and running up against your counterpart, the anti-Messiah – you soon begin to realise that the Center is not all it initially seems. Once again, it's up to you to decide how you want to shape this post-apocalyptic world. The story is even more central in *Shin Megami Tensei II* than its predecessor, especially in relation to all the supporting characters, who are more deeply defined than just Law and Chaos archetypes, particularly the two heroines, Beth and Hiroko. It also carries over a few elements from *Megami Tensei II,* including a quest for the pillars of Solomon, and a final standoff against YHVH.


Trying to make the Lord of the Abyss your servant...

There have been a few improvements over the original – you can now fight multiple types of demon as the same time, and fused demons can now inherit skills from their parents. The conversation system has been slightly expanded, with demons now occasionally asking you questions about your feelings on life. Some interface improvements are included, like having the map available at a single button press instead of having it buried in a menu, and a little coloured bar that indicates when you're about to be attacked. Overall, it's a fantastic sequel.

Originally released for the Super Famicom, *Shin Megami Tensei II* also got a PlayStation treatment similar to that for the first game. And once again, the graphics have been improved via the smooth scrolling effect; some areas have received drastic overhauls, and there's an option for a lowered difficulty level. Unfortunately, the first print run is known to be buggy, and while a fixed version was released, trying to find the right one might be difficult, as there is no distinction on the package. Game Boy Advance and smartphone versions were released as well, though none of these have been officially made available in English.

What happens when society rebuilds after the world is destroyed? That's the question *Shin Megami Tensei II* seeks to answer.

Shin Megami Tensei if...

Developer: Atlus | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SFC, PS1, IOS

Shin Megami Tensei if... is a side story, exploring the question of what if Tokyo hadn't been destroyed, back in the first *Shin Megami Tensei*? It takes place in Karukozaka High School, which has been mysteriously warped off into the demon realm of Makai. If the strange void outside of the school weren't enough, you see visions of a student named Hazama, who now claims to be the ruler of Makai. It's up to you to venture through the world of the demons, investigate Hazama's role in this, save yourself, and maybe your school.

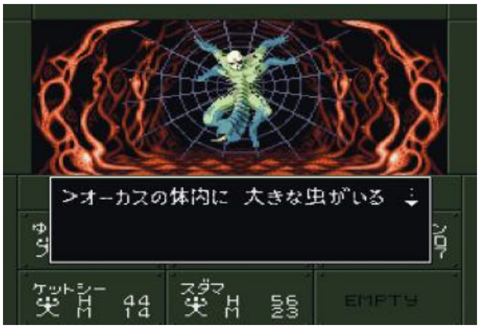
In the Makai, there are five worlds, based on five of the seven deadly sins. For example, in the World of Greed, picking up more treasure will increase the strength of the boss, Chefei. The most gruesome is the World of Gluttony, in which you need to shrink yourself and get eaten by the demon Orcus, then defeat him from within. The series' unusual sense of humour remains, particularly around the evil chemistry teacher Otsuki, who remodels his body with every encounter, to the point where he's a human head on a gigantic mecha.

The character customisation is a little different, as you can make them male or female (which changes parts of the story slightly) and their starting stats are determined by answering questions given by a creepy fortune-telling machine. Then, you can choose to ally yourself with one of three fellow students (a fourth is available in subsequent playthroughs). Your choice will alter the course of the game, taking you through different dungeons and ultimately deciding the ending. So while *SMT if...* is quite a bit shorter than the other games, there is at least a heavy replayability factor.

The other major addition is the Guardian System. When a human character is killed, they are granted a Guardian Spirit, which can alter the statistics when you gain a level – if they have a higher power rating than you do, you'll gain a little bit of extra strength. It works in the opposite direction too – if they have a lower magic ranking, you'll lose magic strength. They'll also alter the magic skills of their human partner. It's an interesting system, although it's a little weird to have to kill yourself so you can change your Guardian.

Much of the game is based on the engine from *Shin Megami Tensei II,* reusing much of its soundtrack and some of its visuals, so it feels more like an expansion pack than a true sequel. As much fun as it is to fight demon-worshipping professors, *SMT if...* lacks the driving plot and philosophical quandaries of the other two SFC games. Still, both the high school setting and the Guardian system laid the groundwork for the *Persona* series. (The heroine from this game is later named Tamaki and shows up in *Persona 2*.)

As for the previous 16-bit entries, there was also a PlayStation release. Additionally, a special prequel chapter starring Hazama was released, only for Japanese mobile phones. Neither game has been officially released in English.



＞オーカスの体内に　大きな虫がいる

ATLUS
真・女神転生
if...

***Shin Megami Tensei if...* sets down the template that would be used in the *Persona* games on the PlayStation. The heroine of this game even makes an appearance in both *Persona 1* and *2* under the name Tamaki.**

Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne

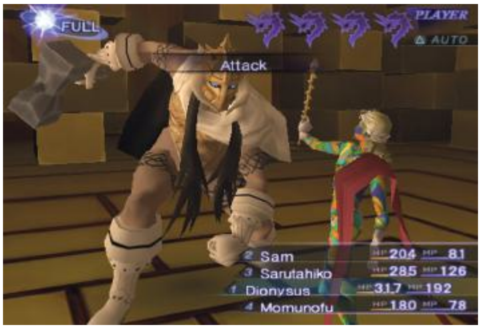
Developer: Atlus | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): PS2, NSW, PS4

The core *Shin Megami Tensei* series skipped the 32-bit generation, as Atlus concentrated instead on the *Devil Summoner* and *Persona* spinoffs. But for the third game, on the PlayStation 2, they returned once again to the post-apocalyptic setting, though viewed through an entirely different lens. The world still ends, but rather than being framed as destruction, it's presented as an essential stage in reincarnation. As in the other games of the series, Tokyo is at the centre of this new creation, as the entirety of existence is wrapped in a sphere called the Vortex World. Only a few humans remain, who must each find their own paths in this new, demon-possessed world. The ideas of Law, Neutral and Chaos are changed to a variety of Reasons, held by the remaining human characters. Shijima is the philosophy that everything can become one; Musubi imagines a world where every being can shape their own existence; and Yosuga is survival of the fittest. The hero can choose one to help shape the world, or reject them to alter existence in other ways.

Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne (a.k.a. *Lucifer's Call* in Europe) makes the move to 3D, and naturally, it's an astronomical improvement over the 32-bit *Persona* and *Devil Summoner* games. Areas include both familiar Tokyo landscapes and hellish, inhuman works of sprawling architecture, giving this world a presence that the older games couldn't dream of. The polygonal models also perfectly replicate Kazuma Kaneko's demon designs, though the overall number is cut back. Shoji Meguro provides the soundtrack, alternating between moody and hard-rocking, with distorted vocals that accompany the game's many different battle themes.

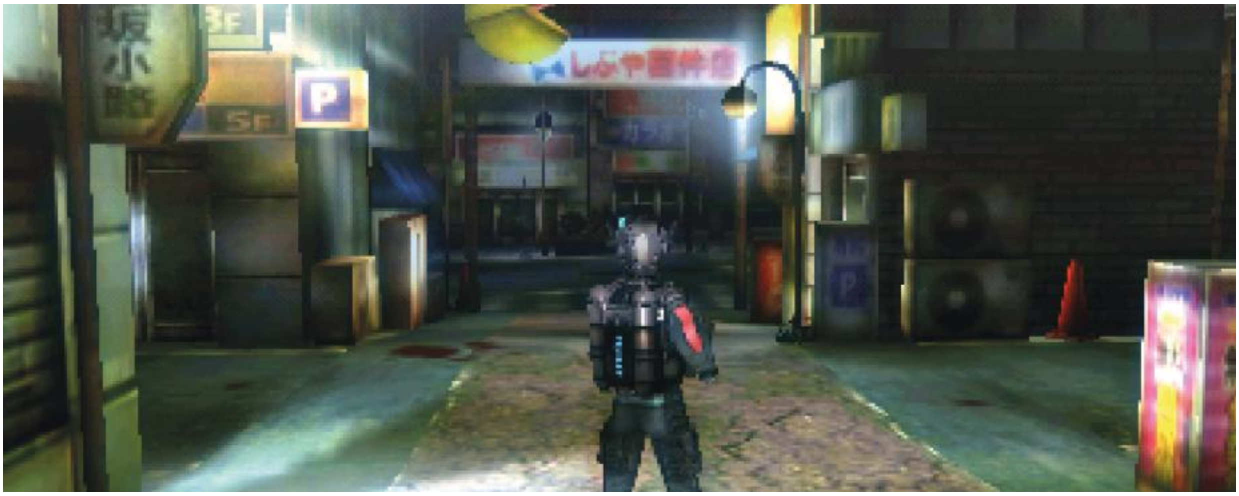
There's still a heavy emphasis on dungeon crawling, and random encounters occur almost everywhere, including towns. Since the hero is now half-demon (referred to as the Demi-fiend), he can wield magic powers, whereas previous *SMT* heroes needed to rely on their demon armies. New to this game is the Press Turn system, whereby inflicting elemental damage will give an extra turn to your side, while using spells that enemies are strong against, or whiffing attacks, will make you lose a turn. The rules apply to both player and CPU, and it's essential to assemble a demon team that provides both strong offensive and defensive capabilities. Magnetite, previously used to power demons when walking around, is gone.

Nocturne was the first title in the core series to be released outside of Japan, though the English version was actually based on the Maniax revised release. This included various balance tweaks, but also several returning bosses from older games, including, most infamously, the skeletal Matador. Appearing just a few hours into the game, he's a huge difficulty spike for those unfamiliar with the game's stat and buffing skills, though those in the know won't find him much of an issue. This version also includes a rather goofy crossover with Dante from Capcom's *Devil May Cry* series – it must have made some kind of sense at the time.



PlayStation.2
Shin Megami Tensei
NOCTURNE
ATLUS

***Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne* feels like a soft reboot of the series, juggling aspects of the series around in an effort to modernise them. Variations on the Press Turn battle system are seen in many subsequent games.**



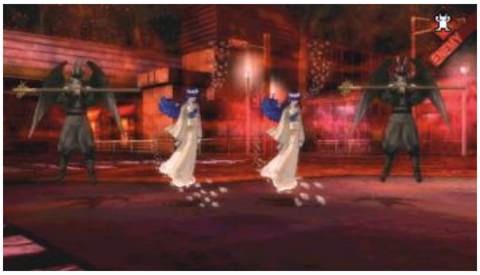
Shin Megami Tensei IV

Developer: Atlus | Released: 2013 | Platform(s): 3DS

Atlus spent much of the PlayStation 2 generation making *Shin Megami Tensei* spinoffs like *Devil Summoner Raidou Kuzunoha* and *Digital Devil Saga*, with *Persona 3* and *4* being the ones that really hit the jackpot. They stayed away almost entirely from the first era of HD consoles, instead focusing on portables. After the first-person DS dungeon crawler *Strange Journey*, they returned to the mainline series with *Shin Megami Tensei IV* for the 3DS.

Rather than playing as an average boy, you control a member of the Samurai of Mikado, an order of warriors who essentially live in a ivory tower atop the ruined remnants of Tokyo. Viewing the people on the ground as filth, they eventually make their way below the surface, to explore this land of gods and demons. The hero is joined by three other Samurai – Jonathan and Walter, the Law and Chaos heroes, respectively, along with Isabeau, the heroine.

The design is a mix of old and new. Hearkening back to older RPGs, particularly the Super Famicom era of the franchise, the story is relatively sparse, depending how much time you spend talking to people or running sub-quests to learn more about the remnants of humanity. As with previous games, humanity has largely divided into two organisations – the Ring of Gaea, which is much as it was before, and the Ashura-kai, basically a yakuza filled with demon hunters. There are plenty of references to past games, even including the Demonica suit from *Strange Journey*. Mechanically, the advances made by the *Persona* games have made this game more approachable – it uses a third-person perspective in exploration, demon fusion is the easiest it's ever been, random battles have given way to visible encounters, and the penalty for failure is light. Even the first-person battle perspective, dry in other RPGs, is spiced up with snazzy special effects, like wind spells blowing foes off the screen. The Press Turn system is familiar, though there's a new Smirk status that grants extra effects for successful attacks.



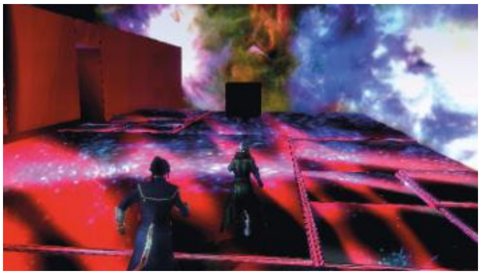
Shin Megami Tensei IV is a deliberate throwback to the older games in the series, but most Westerners haven't played those, so any references come off as meaningless.

Shin Megami Tensei IV also excels in mood. The 3DS can't match the visual designs of its PlayStation 2 predecessor, but Tokyo is still a strong central character. The music enhances the experience, a combination of the guitar-heavy rock that typified early titles and the synthesizers of a John Carpenter movie. The overworld is confusing to navigate, but the music is something you can let run, just soaking in the vibes.

However, in trying to return to its roots, the game ends up feeling regressive in other ways. The Reasons of *Nocturne* have been replaced by the earlier Law/Chaos/Neutral alignments, and it doesn't feel as thematically or politically daring as older titles. The number of dungeons is sparse, and while the story takes a few interesting turns, like some views into alternate Tokyos ruined by Law or Chaos, the thin characterisation makes it feel flat. The difficulty balance is also strange, as the intro dungeon is harder than almost all of the rest of the game, because everything becomes quite easy as you build up skills. Overall it's still a pretty decent title, but it never reaches its full potential.

Shin Megami Tensei IV: Apocalypse

Developer: Atlus | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): 3DS



***Apocalypse*, for the most part, is better than its predecessor, but some aspects of the story indicate that Atlus had no idea how to write a modern *Shin Megami Tensei* game.**

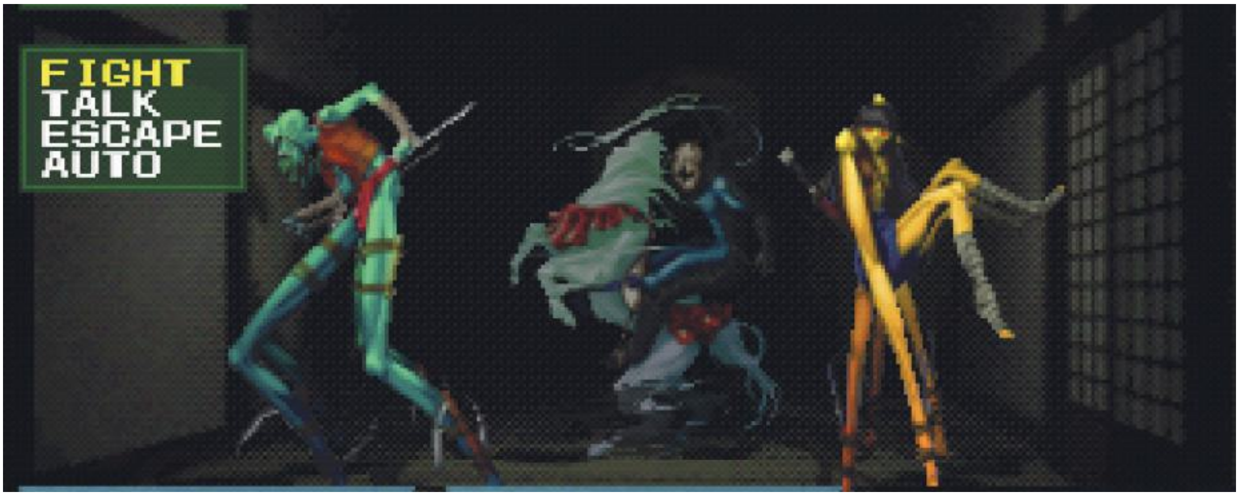
Most Atlus RPGs receive some kind of updated release down the road, like *Persona 4 Golden* for the Vita. *Shin Megami Tensei IV* instead got an expanded pseudo-sequel, subtitled *Apocalypse*. It is technically a whole new story with new quests, though it reuses many areas and assets from the original 3DS game.

The story picks up after the Neutral ending from *SMTIV*. You play a Tokyo native named Nanashi (literally "nameless"), part of a group of demon hunters with his lady pal Asahi. Life is harsh for this team, and Nanashi meets an early end at the hands of a demon, but he's resurrected by the old god Dagda, who then commands him as a slave. He is manipulated into freeing Krishna, who bands together other gods from assorted polytheistic religions to defy Merkabah and Lucifer. This makes things even worse for the people of Tokyo, who now have to contend with a giant flaming serpent named Shesha. Nanashi and his team then set out to correct their mistake and save Tokyo once and for all.

Atlus correctly identified that the side characters from the original *SMTIV* were pretty boring, so the secondary cast here is much stronger. Some are minor characters from this game's predecessor, including Nozomi, the queen of the fairies who fights evil with a rifle and thigh-high boots; the ghost of Navarre, an arrogant Samurai who had gotten himself killed; Hallelujah, a young member of the Ashura-kai; Gaston, another (living) Samurai of Mikado; and Toki, a teenage ninja assassin girl. The *SMTIV* hero, canonically named Flynn, plays a central role in the story, as does Isabeau. Walter and Jonathan are allied with the angels and demons, and so they are your enemies.

While the supporting cast members are far more interesting than before, their lively characterisation just doesn't match up with the typically dark overtones of *Shin Megami Tensei*. When Asahi and Toki begin to fawn over the hero, it feels like the writing is too heavily influenced by *Persona*, and despite the better overall storytelling, it's less authentic than the original *SMTIV*. There's even a beach episode, though at least that's relegated to DLC. The Law and Chaos endings are technically bad endings, and instead the game asks whether you want to ally with your friends to kill Dagda, or embrace Dagda's power and murder them all. It's a little too "power of friendship" vs. "total grimdark", and it shows a lack of subtlety that hampers the writing.

Most other areas have seen substantial improvement, at least. The battle system is mostly the same, other than tweaks to the Smirk system; there are some fantastic boss battles, and the difficulty curve is well balanced. The number and length of the dungeons have been expanded (though the last two are overly long). Some areas are pretty empty, a result of pasting locales from the original game but not putting anything interesting there. Otherwise, it's a more polished experience than its predecessor, and the story is pretty alright if you are okay with its lack of authenticity in terms of the series' classic ideas.

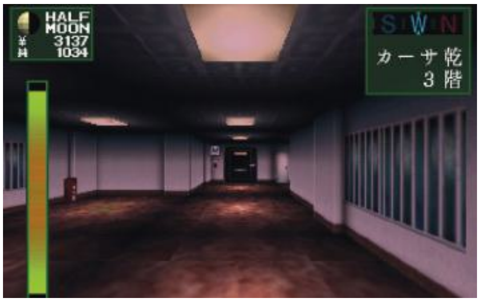


Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner

Developer: Atlus | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SAT, PSP

The first 32-bit *Shin Megami Tensei* game, *Devil Summoner,* made its way to the Saturn in 1995. Moving away from the apocalyptic themes of the original series, and inspired by occult TV dramas like *The X-Files,* the setting is modern-day suburban Japan, where demons have started to roam free. As the story begins, you're on a date with your girlfriend, during which you're attacked by demons. No worries – you're saved by a suave demon hunter named Kyouji. Unfortunately, shortly after this heroic rescue, Kyouji is killed under mysterious circumstances. Things aren't going too well for you either – you're soon kidnapped and subsequently murdered by a crazy lunatic named Sid. Things in the afterlife don't go quite as planned, and your soul ends up back in the human world, in the reanimated body of Kyouji. After crawling out of the morgue, you team up with your partner Rei, grab your GUMP (a demon-summoning gun, it sounds silly but it's a contraction of "gun" and "computer") and try to solve the mysteries of the demon infiltration, as well as maybe get your old body back.

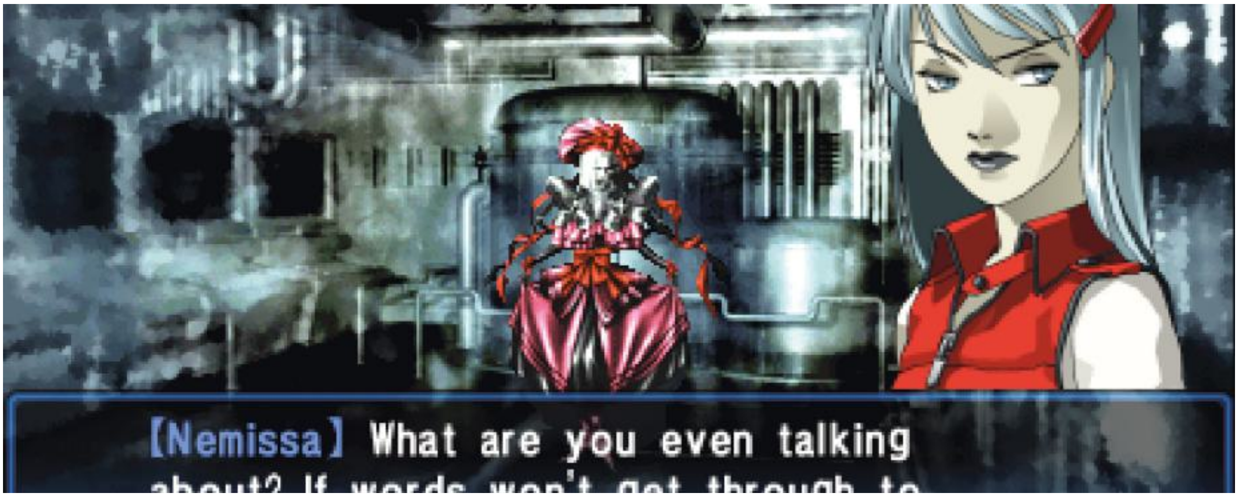
The move to a more powerful platform allows for a substantial visual overhaul. The 3D dungeons are now full-screen and fully animated, though this being the Saturn, the movement is pretty choppy and the draw distance is pretty short. The general flow of the battles is slower than in the previous games, the auto-battle being especially plodding. The enemy graphics are lacking, as they tend to look like barely animated, blurry masses of pixels, and the backgrounds are weird psychedelic clouds of colour. The battle transitions are rather cool, as the floors and walls fly off into the distance before you face your opponents. Still, it is clear that Atlus was just learning the ropes of SEGA's new system.



The conversation system has been expanded, as the monsters will now ask specific questions and require particular answers, though these quickly grow repetitive. More questionable is the introduction of the demon loyalty system. You need to keep your demons happy, by utilising their preferred moves over and over, otherwise you won't be able to directly control their attacks. In the worst cases, they'll ignore your commands altogether or even leave your party. It's an attempt to give depth to the game, but it adds more aggravation than fun. The multiple pathways and endings are also gone, as your alignment only determines which monsters can join your party. The dungeons can also grow to be incredibly difficult.

It's hard to say that *Devil Summoner* is a good first try, because its technical issues are apparent, the loyalty system is a gigantic pain, and the story is so much better in its sequel, *Soul Hackers.* It was well regarded enough to get a port to the PlayStation Portable, though there were barely any enhancements, other than making the demon loyalty a bit less troublesome, covering up some bits of nudity, and a few other quality-of-life changes. Neither version was ever translated into English.

***Devil Summoner* was accompanied by a side disc called *Akuma Zensho* ("Demonic Compendium"), which details all of the demons in the game. Later entries integrate this directly into the game itself.**



[Nemissa] What are you even talking about? If words won't get through to

Devil Summoner: Soul Hackers

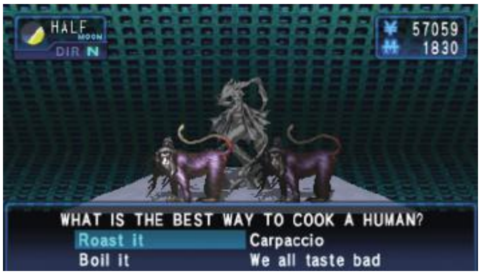
Developer: Atlus | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): SAT, PS1, 3DS

Soul Hackers takes place in Amami City, the home base of Algon Soft, which is unveiling a new virtual reality sim called Paradigm X. However, there seem to be strange glitches damaging its users; it should be no surprise that demons are the cause of it. The hero and his friend Hitomi, who ends up being possessed by a relatively friendly demon named Nemissa, join with a hacker group called the Spookies, in order to get to the bottom of everything.

Pretty much everything about this sequel is an improvement over the original *Devil Summoner*. It keeps the loyalty part of the battle system but it's not as strict, it's much sounder from a technical perspective, and the difficulty is much better balanced. It retains its eccentric cast of supporting characters and villains, this time including a genius talking ape and a rocker named Carol J, who uses his guitar as a GUMP. The leader of the Spookies is obviously based on Fox Mulder of *The X-Files*, while Kadokura, the president of Algon Soft, is basically an evil Bill Gates (his name has the kanji for "gate" in it). The members of the Spookies gang also play a central role in the story, giving some extra emotional resonance to the epidemic plaguing the city. Since Hitomi and Nemissa are constantly fighting for control over a single body, and their personalities are quite different, they make for amusing companions. Kyouji (or rather, whoever's body Kyouji is inhabiting) and Rei also make a cameo appearance, though the story in *Soul Hackers* is completely separate from its predecessor's, so not much is lost if you've not played the earlier one.

There's some influence from Native American mythology, as the hero is guided by a voice that sends him on a few spirit quests, in which he goes back in time and briefly inhabits the soul of another devil summoner in the last moments before their death. While these give clues on how to proceed, they're unfortunately under-utilised, as there are only three of them and the sequences are brief. The virtual reality setting also allows for a number of unique and unusual settings, including an area based on a chessboard and a fight against a dolphin, though many areas are still just warehouses and office buildings.

As a product of the late '90s, *Soul Hackers* feels like a period piece – it was imagining what the internet would be like in the near future, at a time when it was first becoming popular. The game was initially released for the Saturn, then ported to the PlayStation, the latter including a bonus dungeon that could originally only be unlocked by obtaining a rare add-on disc straight from Atlus. Both of these were Japan-only, but the game got another lease on life on the 3DS, and this version was released internationally. It includes full voice acting and some hidden bosses that tie in with the *Raidou Kuzunoha* series, plus various "hacks", which are basically cheats that let you turn off some of the more annoying aspects of the game, like eliminating the need for Magnetite. The series had ditched this around *Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne*, so it helps make the game feel a little more modern.



WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO COOK A HUMAN?
Roast it
Carpaccio
Boil it
We all taste bad

DEVIL SUMMONER
SOUL HACKERS
NINTENDO 3DS
ATLUS

***Soul Hackers* returns to the "what if computers were actually evil?" theme of the original *Megami Tensei* novels, now focused on the burgeoning internet. Some parts are more silly than scary, but it still works.**

Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga

Developer: Atlus | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): PS2

Straying from the usual present-day or post apocalyptic Japan of other *Shin Megami Tensei* games, the *Digital Devil Saga* sub-series (subtitled *Avatar Tuner* in the Japanese release) takes place in a dystopic wasteland that combines futuristic elements with Hindu architecture and mythology. This land is known as The Junkyard, and is occupied by several tribes, which are locked in constant war with each other, all hoping to be the last tribe remaining, which will ascend to the paradise known as Nirvana. As Serph, the leader of the Embryon tribe, you discover a mysterious egg that awakens dormant demon forms. Furthermore, you discover a girl named Sera underneath this egg, who has the power to control these beasts with a soothing song. Only by interrogating the other tribes can you solve the mystery of the demons, the girl, and Nirvana.

Digital Devil Saga uses the same graphic style and Press Turn battle system as *Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne*, though many of the other gameplay elements have been scaled back. No longer do you talk to demons, or even recruit them – instead, you're restricted to main party members, with three fighting in battle at a time. For the majority of the time you fight as a transformed demon, though occasionally you'll be forced to fight in weaker, human form. There are special Devour attacks, where you'll shove an enemy into your mouth and obtain extra experience points if you kill it, but you'll get a stomach ache if you abuse it.

3/8
Middle Layer

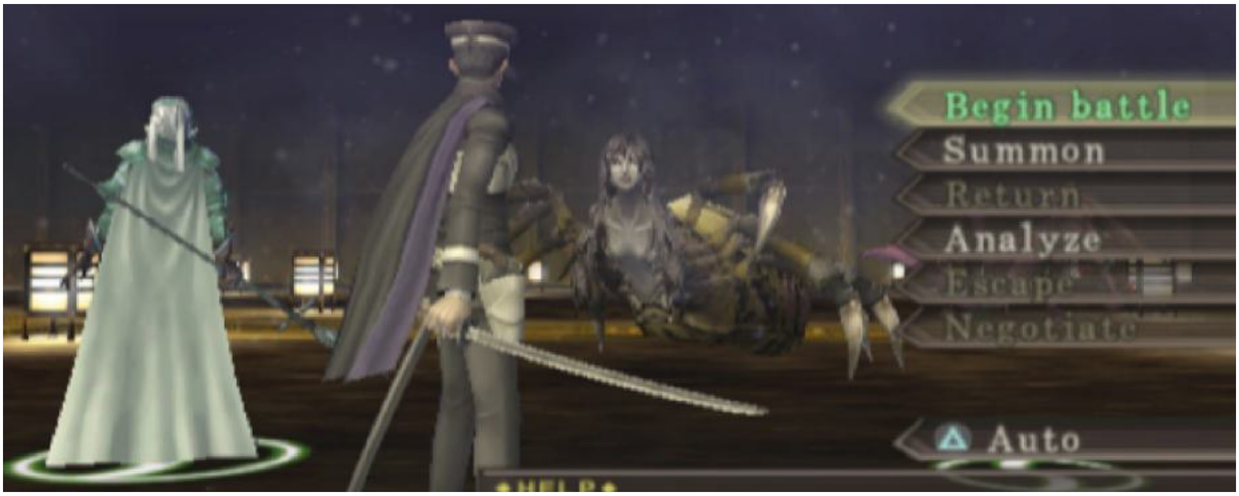
The character development system is similar to *Final Fantasy X*'s Sphere Grid system, with several linear paths a character can take. (In keeping with the Hindu theme, these paths are called Mantras while regular experience levels are referred to as Karma.) You can start on the fire path to learn attack and defence spells, or concentrate more on healing spells. Each of your characters is fully customisable, and the development is far less abstract than the demon creation/recruitment of the other *Shin Megami Tensei* games.

There are technically two *Digital Devil Saga* games, but it's probably more accurate to say that it's one large game that was broken up into two releases. Indeed, the story in the first game is pretty thin, as it's really just a prologue for the much meatier sequel. In that, Serph and friends reach Nirvana, but they find that it's more like hell than heaven. A cruel sun beats down on a desolate landscape, filled with human-like statues, and ruled by an evil organisation known as the Karma Society. Mechanically, it's pretty similar, though the Mantra system here is less linear, and the blazing sun can sometimes turn your party members into Half-Demons, which grant huge strength, at the expense of restricting magic and lowering defence.

Despite feeling padded out – it should've been one release – *Digital Devil Saga* still has the stylish designs, fantastic story, and compelling battle system the series is known for.

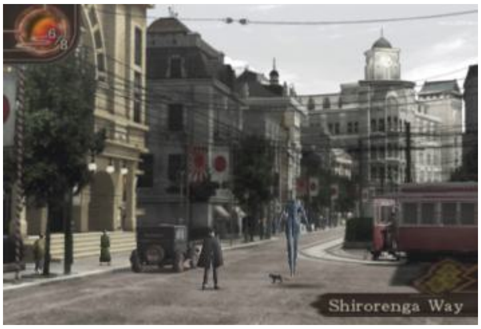
PlayStation 2
DELUXE BOX SET
DIGITAL DEVIL SAGA
ATLUS

What if the heroes were actually the demons? That's the premise behind this PlayStation 2 duology, which was the follow-up to *Nocturne*.



Devil Summoner: Raidou Kuzunoha

Developer: Atlus | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PS2



PlayStation 2
Devil Summoner

Taking the name of the 32-bit era *Devil Summoner* series, the PS2 *Raidou Kuzunoha* sub-series moves away from the modern/futuristic settings and into the past, back to pre-WWII Japan. It's the year Taisho 20 in the Japanese calendar, in an alternate history in which the emperor of Japan lived longer than he did in our world. As a young detective who's inherited the name Raidou, it's your job to investigate all of the strange demon outbreaks around town. Joining him is a talking cat named Gouto, a reincarnated form of an earlier Raidou Kuzunoha, who teaches him the ropes. There are two games in the series – *Raidou Kuzunoha vs. Soulless Army*, featuring a legion of beings clad in full metal armour, and *Raidou Kuzunoha vs. King Abaddon*, pitting you against an evil lord's horde of man-eating insects.

Raidou Kuzunoha is the first in the *Shin Megami Tensei* series to ditch the standard turn-based system in favour of action-based gameplay. There are still random battles, in which you're zapped to a separate screen to fight. Here, Raidou can attack with his sword, fire his elemental-based gun, and block attacks. Additionally, you're joined by demon companions who act of their own volition (with some vague AI commands) and can be switched out at any time. The battle system feels pretty undercooked in the first game – you can only take out one demon companion at a time, and the camera is set in a fixed position, making it difficult to see the action as you walk away from it. You can obtain new demons by finding their weak spots and stunning them. The sequel improves things by allowing two demons at a time, featuring a more dynamic camera, and also reinstating the demon conversation system.

Outside of battle, you can also call demons out when running around, and each one has a special ability. For example, fire-based demons can anger people and make them shout out clues. Others can read minds and obtain vital secrets, or scout for items. You can even take control of any demon and have them talk to people – it's amusing to see their reactions.

The first game is pretty rough around the edges – outside of the battle system, there are tons of fetch quests, and the constant random battles – which even happen in towns – are frustrating. The sequel tones this down, thankfully, plus it adds in the Law/Chaos/Neutral plot branches, along with appropriately aligned characters, that make the story much richer. However, the second game also recycles so many assets, particularly the city that it takes place in, that it feels more like an expansion pack than a sequel.

Still, the setting is fascinating, particularly the pre-rendered backgrounds and architecture – there are few games that take place in this era, and even fewer that are localised. Shoji Meguro's soundtrack mixes his usual rock with a more jazzy flavour, the localisation is filled with period-appropriate lingo, and the pulpy mystery feel is a refreshing change for the franchise.

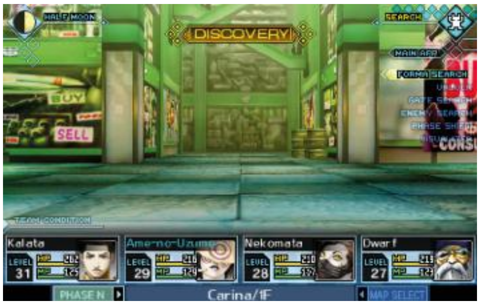
The Taisho era of Japan is fascinating, and not something that often appears in Western publications, making this sub-series an enthralling historical lesson.

Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey

Developer: Atlus/Lancarse | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): DS, 3DS

The *Shin Megami Tensei* series effectively ditched the first-person perspective with the release of the third game, *Nocturne*. However, Atlus then sparked a small revolution with their classically-styled DS dungeon crawler *Etrian Odyssey*, so they decided to return to that more retro style for this spinoff game. Released between the third and fourth canon *Shin Megami Tensei* titles, this opted to be a spin-off rather than a numbered title. The game no longer takes place in Tokyo, unlike the others. Instead, it focuses on something called the Schwarzwelt, basically a black hole that begins forming at the South Pole and threatens to consume the Earth. The best and brightest minds come together to launch a military expedition inside of it; you play as one of the surviving teams, which discovers a strange world infested with (as to be expected) demons.

The game is structured more like *Etrian Odyssey* than any of the classic *Shin Megami Tensei* titles – your vessel is a home base, and you choose from sectors via a menu. Each area is based on one of mankind's sins – a battle representing the horrors of war, a red light district reflecting lust, a giant shopping mall representing greed, a big garbage dump as a stand in for pollution, and so forth. Entering new zones is particularly scary, since new demons show up as static, and are only revealed once you've defeated them, so you're never quite sure what you're fighting until you've had some experience roaming around. While early areas seek to ease you into the first-person dungeon-crawling style, the later areas go in hard with darkness, teleportation tiles, damage zones, and other things that make life miserable.



Strange Journey is at its best when it makes everything feel dire and hopeless. Your crew members are dying, the ones that remain are at odds with each other (with the two most prominent ones becoming the usual Law and Chaos heroes), and the difficulty is much less forgiving than in the other *SMT* spinoffs that were released around the same time. Part of this has to do with the fights, which ditch the Press Turn system. The combat system does re-introduce demon alignments (absent since *Nocturne*). If you attack an enemy's weakness, then demons of the same alignment will attack alongside you, which usually isn't quite as big an advantage as getting an extra turn. But at the same time, the fights are not quite as satisfying. The music is a big departure from the usual too, ditching the rock in favour of moody orchestrations and creepy chanting. It's very good, though there are few tracks, and they begin to sound the same after a while.

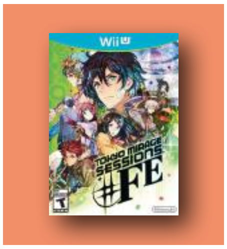
The requisite 3DS update, dubbed *Redux*, tunes up the visuals, adds voice acting, makes the usual balance tweaks, and speeds up the battle system. There's also an expansive side quest starring a mysterious woman, which leads to three new endings, giving six in total. However, the actual story in this new part is kind of ridiculous, and it doesn't really fit. Other than this thread, *Strange Journey* in general feels truer to the ideals of the series than the actual fourth entry.

NINTENDO DS
SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI
STRANGE JOURNEY
M
ATLUS

Strange Journey **is a homage to the sci-fi/action/horror movies of the '80s, particularly** ***Aliens*** **and** ***The Thing*****.**

Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE

Developer: Nintendo/Atlus | Released: 2015 | Platform(s): WIIU, NSW



In 2013, Nintendo announced a collaboration between themselves and Atlus, creating a crossover between the *Shin Megami Tensei* and *Fire Emblem* series. It's an odd combo, especially since the Super Famicom game *Majin Tensei* was already basically a *Fire Emblem* clone in a *Shin Megami Tensei* wrapper. No one could have expected the end result of this project, which was released at the end of 2015 for the Wii U, titled *Tokyo Mirage Sessions: #FE* (the "#" is "sharp" not "hashtag").

The story takes place in modern day Tokyo, focusing on the Japanese idol and entertainment industry. The main trio – Itsuki Aoi, Tsubasa Oribe, and Touma Akagi – are all high schoolers and newbies to the industry, who have joined the Fortuna Entertainment company. The cast is rounded out by other folks in their music group, including Kiria Kurono, a veteran singer; Eleonora Yumizuru, a half-Scandinavian actress; and Mamori Minamoto, a cooking show host. At the centre of the story is energy called Performa, which fuels people's creative passions. This draws in beings called Mirages from another universe called the Idolasphere. Some are good, and some are evil, and the crew must fight the bad ones.

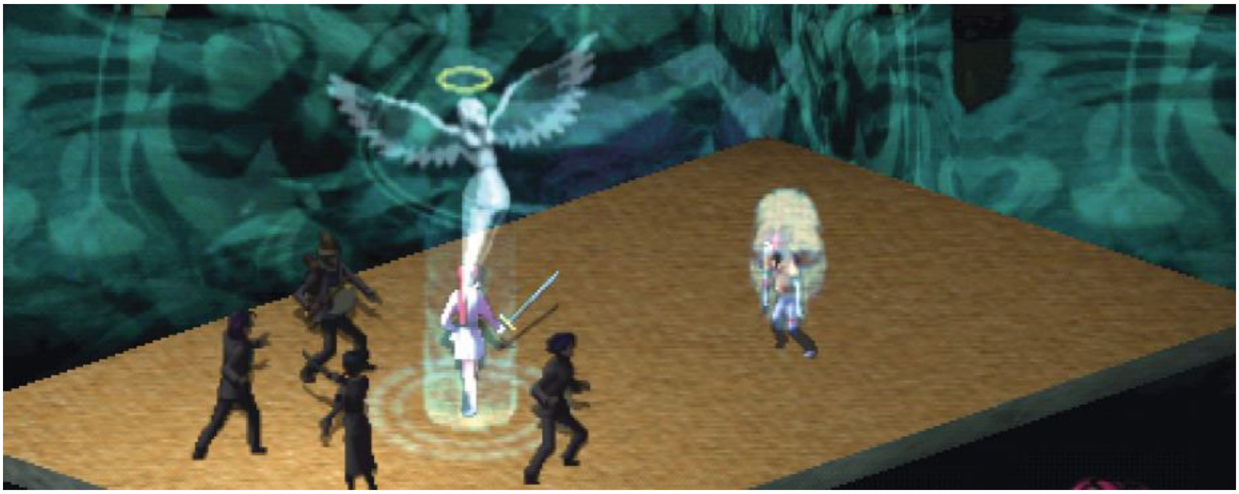
The Mirages are roughly similar to the Personas from the *Persona* games, with the catch being that they're all based on Fire *Emblem* heroes. Chrom, Virion and Tharja hail from *Fire Emblem Awakening*, the 3DS entry (and at the time, the latest game in the series), while Cain, Draug and Navarre come from the original Famicom *Fire Emblem*. Tiki the dragon girl, also from the first game, acts as a guide who helps link the Mirages to their Masters.

Most of the game focuses on Shibuya, and other parts of Tokyo, like super-fashionable Harajuku. Dungeon action takes place in the Idolasphere realm, where the heroes must fight someone possessed by an evil Mirage. The combat is very similar to that in the latter-day *Shin Megami Tensei* and *Persona* games, using many of the same spell and attack names. Exploiting enemy weaknesses will trigger Session Attacks, allowing other team members to follow up with another attack. Most fights are conducted in the middle of an arena, giving them an over-the-top theatrical feel.

The dungeon design is a little boring and the load times are a little long, but otherwise it's a solid RPG. But it's also unclear who this game was really designed for. The upbeat tone is closer to *Persona 4* than *Shin Megami Tensei*, but neither the characters nor their relationships are nearly as interesting. There's none of the strategy of the *Fire Emblem* games, and given the drastic pop-star makeovers of the characters, they don't even resemble their normal game selves. It's no surprise that it didn't find much of an audience.

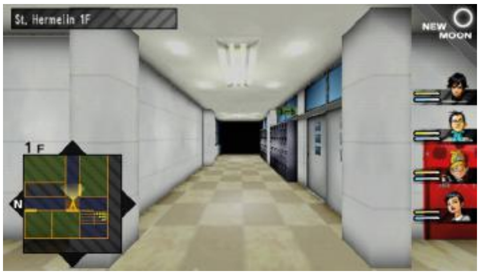
There were some curious changes when the game was localised into English. Many of these involved cutting back on some the raciness, but it's done inconsistently – panty shots are clouded but there's still plenty of breast jiggle, and some costumes that weren't all that revealing to begin with were modified. The voices were left in Japanese as well.

The English version of this game made some curious changes, including altering Tsubasa's job from gravure idol (in the Japanese version) to regular model, and removing panty shots. Some of these alterations make the game feel less gross, but others are unnecessary.



Persona

Developer: Atlus | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): PS1, PSP



Beyond the *Devil Summoner* series, Atlus sought to expand its RPG stable with a new series called *Persona*. It doesn't use the *Shin Megami Tensei* name though, but rather the monikers *Megami Ibunroku* ("Strange Goddess Chronicles") in Japan and *Revelations* in North America. Borrowing generously from the setting and concepts of *Shin Megami Tensei If...*, it focuses on a group of high school students in modern Japan, who discover the ability to summon beings called Personas from within themselves by playing a fortune telling game. The characters are a bit more fleshed out than in the Super Famicom games, though they still fit into the standard stereotypes (the rich snob, the classy girl, the delinquent, etc.) The story begins when their town of Mikage-cho is overrun by demons, which ties in with a sick, hospitalised girl named Maki, and an evil local corporation called SEBEC.

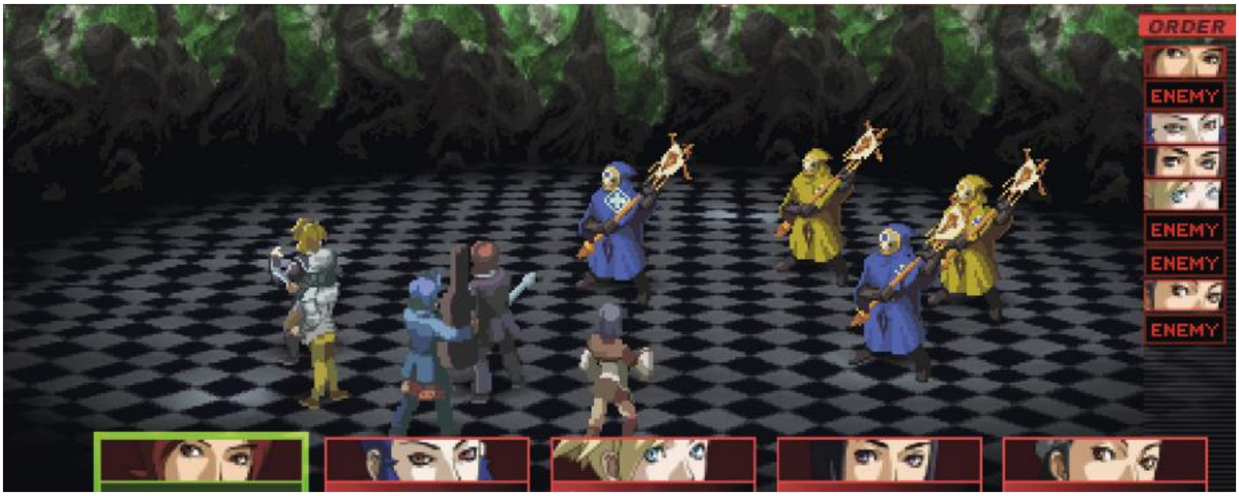
Dungeon exploration is still done from the first-person perspective, but in many other sections, particularly in combat, the game switches to an isometric overhead viewpoint. You can configure your party members formation on a grid, thus determining which enemies they can attack on the battlefield. You still chat with demons, but this differs from the main *Shin Megami Tensei* mechanic. Instead, each party member has various ways of talking that can provoke emotional responses. If you make the demons angry or scared, they'll fight or run away. More important is making them happy or interested, after which they'll give you items, including tarot cards, which can be refined into making more Personas. Characters can then swap Personas, influencing their abilities. It's all less vague than the demon recruitment of the old games.

The original PlayStation version made some questionable localisation choices, which included changing the setting from Japan to America, and altering some characters to make them less "anime". The most awkward of these was the goof-off Masao being redesigned as an African-American. A significant amount of content was cut as well. In the Japanese version, you could choose to either follow the main route to take down SEBEC, or take an alternate route called the Snow Queen quest, which is a little shorter but more difficult. For some reason, the Snow Queen plot was removed completely.

With the popularity of *Persona 3*, Atlus revisited the original game with a port to the PSP. The English release is much more faithful this time, restoring all of the cut and changed content. However, in all versions, the entire soundtrack was redone in the style of the later games, complete with extensive vocalisations. The original music was one of its biggest strengths, and the new music just doesn't fit.

Persona is certainly a unique game in style and setting, but it's still extremely rough, even in the retooled PSP re-release. The characters really aren't all that developed, and the battle system is slow and tedious, since so much of it relies on positioning. Subsequent games have improved on the formula so much that it's really difficult to go back to this one.

The original *Persona* was rough around the edges even when it was released; even the slightly upgraded PSP port doesn't do much to make it palatable to modern audiences, and actively makes the soundtrack worse.



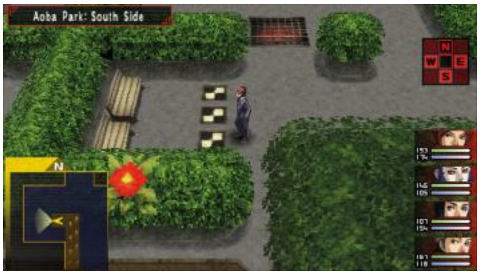
Persona 2: Innocent Sin / Eternal Punishment

Developer: Atlus | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1, PSP

Persona 2 is a welcome change from the original. It ditches the first-person dungeons in favour of a completely overhead view, with sprite-based characters and polygonal landscapes. It's also so big that it had to be divided into two games: *Innocent Sin* and *Eternal Punishment*. The story is separate from the first game's, although taking place in the same universe.

Innocent Sin focuses on a group of high schoolers living in Sumaru City, including Tatsuya, a quiet motorcycle enthusiast; Eikichi, a hormonal punk; and Lisa, an American girl raised in Japan and a kung-fu enthusiast. Rounding out the cast is Maya, the upbeat reporter from a teen magazine, and Yukino, Maya's photographer and a returning character from the first game. There's an urban legend that if you call your own phone number, a being called the Joker will appear to do your bidding. However, it seems that this Joker is responsible for quite a number of murders across the city; plus, he seems to have taken a curious interest in the main characters, who are apparently guilty of some kind of past sin they've forgotten about. Joker's powers have also caused rumours to alter reality. At first, this power is subtle, but eventually it falls into the wrong hands, a conspiracy-theory cult that believes in an ancient spaceship lying beneath the city, and causes Adolf Hitler to return, commanding an army of flying mecha soldiers.

At the ending of *Innocent Sin*, reality is so messed up that the powers-that-be need to hit the reset button, so to speak. This required that the heroes forget each other; however, Tatsuya feels so strongly about their bonds that he refuses this memory loss, causing remnants of the broken world to bleed into the new reality. *Eternal Punishment* takes place in this "reset" world. It casts Maya as the main protagonist, though Tatsuya is still a big part of the story. New party members include Ulala, Maya's best friend; Katsuya, Tatsuya's police officer older brother; and Baofu, a hacker with mafia connections.

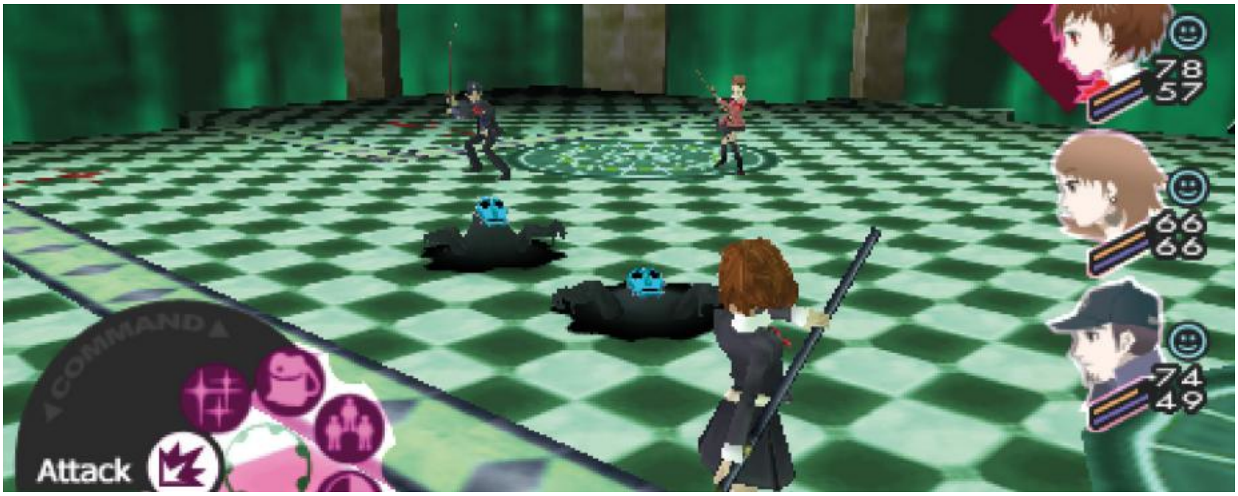


PSP
PERSONA2

The plot and characters are where *Persona 2* really shines. They have strong relationships with each other, and you really get attached to them while the absolutely crazy plots unfold. Also, while they don't really have "dating" elements, as the later games do, there are potential romances for Tatsuya to pursue, including one with a male party member, Jun. Not even the later games offered same-sex options. The cast of *Eternal Punishment* is also unique because they're adults rather than high schoolers, dealing with more mature issues, However, it's still a huge pain to actually play. The dungeons are long and repetitive, with high random encounter rates. The battle system has removed the grids that made fighting so obnoxious in the first game, but it's still too slow.

Despite the two halves being essential to each other, only *Eternal Punishment* was initially localised, leaving players to learn the plot of *Innocent Sin* from the manual and a short anime. The latter was finally released in America as a PSP port in 2011.

Split into two releases, only the second, *Eternal Punishment*, initially made it over in English. It was an odd choice for localisation, since so much of its rests on having played *Innocent Sin*, and it feels like starting a book halfway through.



Persona 3

Developer: Atlus | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PS2, PSP

5/ 9 · Sa
Dark Hour
Full
10th/11th Carriage

PlayStation 2
P3
ATLUS

The first two *Persona* games were moderate successes, but the third acted as a soft reboot for the series, drastically reworking its structure, and leading it to international acclaim. To that end, it looked towards dating and social sims like Konami's *Tokimeki Memorial* and SEGA's *Sakura Wars*, and merged it with the "teenagers face demons" theme that's core to the series.

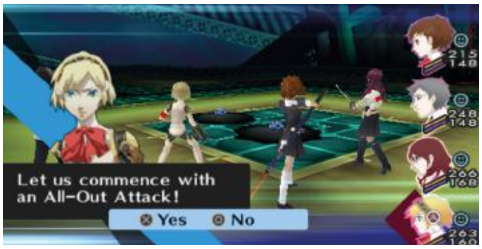
The hero is a transfer student to Gekkoukan High School, where he learns that he has the power to summon Personas. He comes across other students with similar powers, known as SEES, who are investigating a phenomenon called the Dark Hour, a mysterious time after midnight when most of the rest of the world freezes, and their school takes on the form of a distorted labyrinth called Tartarus filled with evil shadow monsters. During the day, you live the life of an average high schooler – attending classes, joining clubs, hanging out around the city after school, and such. But at night, you explore the halls of Tartarus with your buddies, fighting monsters, eventually taking on major threats against all life.

The first friends made by the main hero in SEES are Junpei, the male "best friend" character (a type who makes regular appearances in the series), and Yukari, a cheerful young woman, while boxer Akihiko and upper-class lady Mitsuru show the characters the ropes. Some of the more unusual characters include Koromaru, a dog that can somehow summon Personas, and Aigis, a female robot created by Mitsuru's family's company. The presentation is super-stylish, with flashy menus and a blue-dominated interface. Accompanying this is a poppy soundtrack by Shoji Meguro, a regular on the PS2 *SMT* titles, this time making it slightly jazzier, and including English language rap lyrics. It feels hip in a way that most other JRPGs don't, appropriately for a game about trendy teenagers. Rather dramatically, the Personas are forced out of users' heads via a pistol-like device called an Evoker, so every time they summon one, it looks like they're shooting themselves.

The game operates on a calendar, with various tests and events held on specific days. As with most dating sims, the protagonist has a number of personality stats, increased by performing various day-to-day tasks. This not only informs other activities, but also affects who you can socialise with. One of the main aspects of *Persona 3* are Social Links, each of which is focused on various characters in the game world – some being main party members, others students, and some just various people around the city, like an elderly couple who are grieving over their dead son, and even an online pal you meet in an MMO. As you continue to get to know them, you level up these links; in turn, characters are associated with tarot arcana, each linked in turn to certain types of Personas. So, when you fuse one of those Personas, it will get a power boost, potentially far beyond what your character could normally use, and will eventually unlock a new Persona to create.

On most days, you can also choose to enter Tartarus before going to sleep. This tower consists

Leading a dual life as "student by day, demon hunter by night" proved to be an enthralling prospect for RPG players all over the world.



Let us commence with an All-Out Attack!

Mitsuru Kirijo
She's a transfer student. It was a last minute decision to assign her here.

Persona 3 Portable retrofits many of the improvements added in _Persona 4_, though since it's still missing some stuff like the _FES_ post-game story, there's no real definitive version.

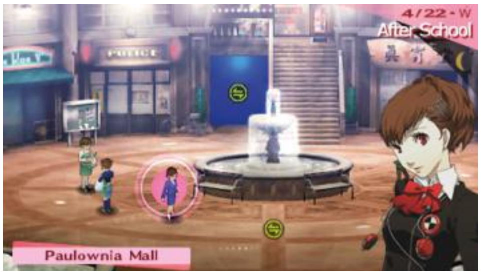
of well over 200 floors, each randomly-generated every time you enter. Unlike the previous PS2 *Shin Megami Tensei* games, there are no random encounters, and enemies are visible. The battle system is similar to the Press Turn implementation in *Nocturne*, but here, if you hit a weakness, you'll also knock your opponent down, causing them to lose a turn. If all of the enemies are knocked down, you can execute an All-Out Attack, greatly damaging all of them and potentially ending fights quickly. Demon conversation is gone, and instead Personas are obtained via card shuffles after combat. You gain Personas far more readily than in the previous games, though only the protagonist can switch theirs, and others' evolve as they level up. Your party is also guided by a navigator, who doesn't participate in combat but gives feedback as well as commentary during battle.

As often happens with innovative products, *Persona 3* suffers from questionable design decisions. The most egregious is that you can only directly command the protagonist in combat, while everyone else is governed by AI. Most of the time, they act intelligently, but it's still frustrating that so much control is removed from the player. Each character also has a hidden Stamina stat that prevents them from staying in the dungeon too long – they'll tire out and become useless in combat, which basically forces you to leave and resume the run another day. Also, due to the randomly-generated dungeons, the game is pretty repetitive, as so much of Tartarus just looks and feels like the same aimless hallways over and over. It changes scenery and music every once in a while, but otherwise, the only variations are the boss dungeons that occur as you progress through the school year. Between drawn-out dungeon crawling, the social aspects, and the slow-moving story, it just seems to go on forever.

These issues are frustrating, but the concept was just so fresh, the look so stylistic, and the combat so slick that it proved to be immensely popular worldwide. So Atlus quickly released an enhanced follow-up called *Persona 3 FES*, short for "festival". The major draw here is an expansive epilogue chapter called The Answer, putting Aigis in the starring role. The story is thin and it's largely focused on dungeon exploration and combat, though it does add quite a bit of extra play time.

Atlus was keen to listen to players' complaints about *Persona 3*, and thus many issues were addressed in *Persona 4*, released a few years later. Many of those improvements were then retroactively carried over to another release, *Persona 3 Portable* for the PSP. Beyond the convenience of being able to play the game on the go, there are tons of quality-of-life improvements – every character can be controlled in combat, and the Stamina stat is gone, so you just leave when you run out of SP and can't use magic anymore. In the original release, one particular quirk was that among the Social Links, the main character could interact with the female party members but not the male ones, seemingly to emphasise the romantic relationships you could engage in. To compensate, this version includes the ability to choose a female protagonist, each with her own Social Links, many featuring brand new characters, and granting Social Links for the main party. There's quite a bit of new dialogue and music to complement this mode, as well as a pink UI colour scheme. A few things are cut back though – instead of running around your dorm or in town, navigation is handled entirely through menus, and cutscenes are all implemented with simple character portraits and text. It makes the game move faster, at least.

The PSP version is also missing the *FES* post-game, so despite its many improvements, it can't be considered definitive. Plus, in the grand scheme of things, both of its sequels are mostly better games. Still, they both lean more into the dating sim aspects, while *Persona* 3 maintains a dour atmosphere that makes it feel thematically closer to the classic *Shin Megami Tensei* games.



136 129
118
160 83

The addition of a female protagonist in the PSP version of _Persona 3_ is fantastic, and it's a little disappointing that the heroes of subsequent games remained male-only.

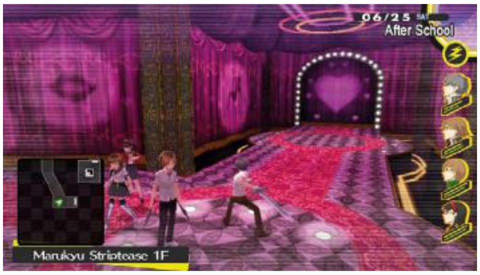
Persona 4

Developer: Atlus | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): PS2, PSV, WIN

Persona 4 opens with the protagonist (canon name: Yu Narukami) moving out to the developing rural town of Inaba. Some strange murders have begun taking place, coinciding with the discovery of a mysterious dimension that appears on televisions as the "Midnight Channel". Once again, the hero makes some friends, unlocks their Personas, and begins to investigate.

This sequel addresses nearly all of the issues with *Persona 3*. First and foremost, you can directly control your characters! Secondly, your characters no longer get tired when exploring, and instead you're simply compelled to leave when you run out of SP. The dungeons have improved dramatically. Each chapter focuses on a single character, who has been kidnapped, and has a dungeon themed around their insecurities. For example, Rise is a pop idol who feels exploited, so her dungeon is a strip club; Kanji is a hot-headed delinquent who prefers traditionally feminine things like sewing, so his area is a bath-house filled with gay stereotypes; Naoto is a female detective dealing with sex discrimination, so she envisions a robotic lab where her gender can be changed. Visually, these are so much more interesting than the repetitive Tartarus, even though they're still randomly generated. Thematically, they also tie into the main thread of being true to one's identity, and allow for strong characterisations, since you're fighting inside the minds of your friends and sympathising with their struggles.

Most of the dungeons are based on party members, though one of them features an antagonistic nerd, whose dungeon is themed on retro JRPGs. Other characters include Yosuke, the standard "bro" best friend; Yukiko, the daughter of the town's famous inn; Chie, a kung-fu loving tomboy; and Teddie, a mysterious resident of the TV World who looks like a gigantic stuffed bear and acts as the game's mascot.

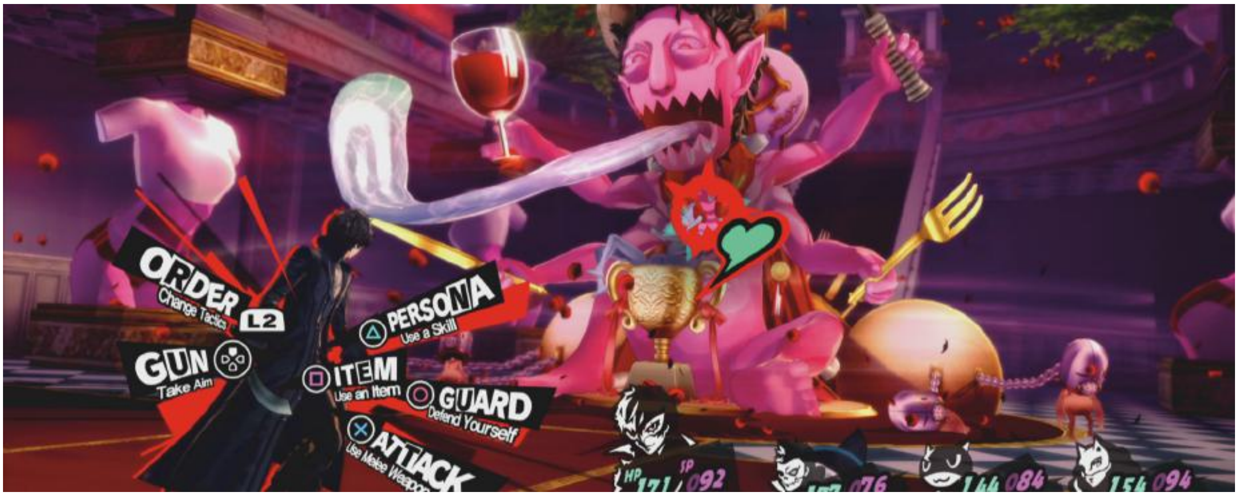


Persona 4 leans more heavily into the dating sim aspect of its predecessor. It functions the same way, but the characters all act as if the protagonist is the centre of their universe, so it feels more like fantasy wish fulfilment than before. Along with this, the vibe is generally so much more upbeat than in *Persona 3*, with bright interface colours and an incredibly peppy soundtrack. It's very effective at what it does, because it's easy to get attached to your buddies – there's a reason this game is so well-loved – but it's also astonishing to see how this type of game grew from something as grim as the original *Shin Megami Tensei*.

A Vita port, dubbed *Persona 4 Golden*, tweaks a few elements, like letting you visit certain parts of Inaba at night, and makes a few quality-of-life adjustments, like letting you pick individual skills during demon fusion instead of the computer doing it for you. The game's calendar runs longer, allowing for a fairly lengthy post-game segment starring a new, mysterious character named Marie. The added storylines here – a beach episode! the team forms a band! – are even goofier than those in the original version, and it's quite a bit easier, though those issues aside, it's the best version.

PS VITA
P4G
PERSONA 4 GOLDEN

In spite of the high stakes, end-of-the-universe mystery they end up embroiled in, the heroes of *Persona 4* have a laid back, friendly vibe, with their central base being the local department store, Junes.



Persona 5

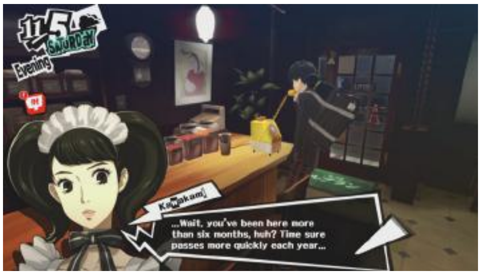
Developer: Atlus | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PS3, PS4

Society is ruled by the powerful and the corrupt, but what can the average person to do to fight back? In *Persona 5,* as a masked superhero codenamed Joker, you lead a group called the Phantom Thieves, who find such individuals, infiltrate their minds, and "steal their hearts" to get them to confess to their crimes. It's a daring concept, with many themes and villains drawn from real life – an abusive gym teacher, a plagiarising artist, an exploitative business owner, even a politician who resembles real-life Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The dungeons are themed "palaces" based on their crimes – a fancy sex castle, a museum, a space station, a cruise liner, etc. Conceptually, it's the inverse of *Persona 4,* as instead of entering the minds of your friends, you're exploring the thoughts and feelings of the villains. You are introduced to this world through Morgana, a talking cat-creature mascot.

Persona 5 brings back elements of the classic *Shin Megami Tensei* series. Rather than taking place in fictional cities like the other *Persona* games, this one is focused on Tokyo. Some combat elements return, like the inclusion of guns, and enemies are no longer shadows but rather the demons themselves. Conversation is once again the main method of procuring new Personas, accomplished by exploiting the weaknesses of all of the enemies and holding them up at gunpoint. The interface is as stylish as ever, particularly the menu transitions, as simple button presses are met with flashy full-screen animations.

Unlike the repetitive, randomly-generated dungeons of *Persona 3* and *4, Persona 5* has individually crafted ones. These makes exploration much more interesting, but since you're supposed to be thieves, you need to play stealthily, which means you can't run straight through them attacking everything. Combined with their long duration, this exacerbates one of the series' other biggest issues: its sluggish pacing. There is still a random dungeon called Mementos, where you can run assorted sub-quests.

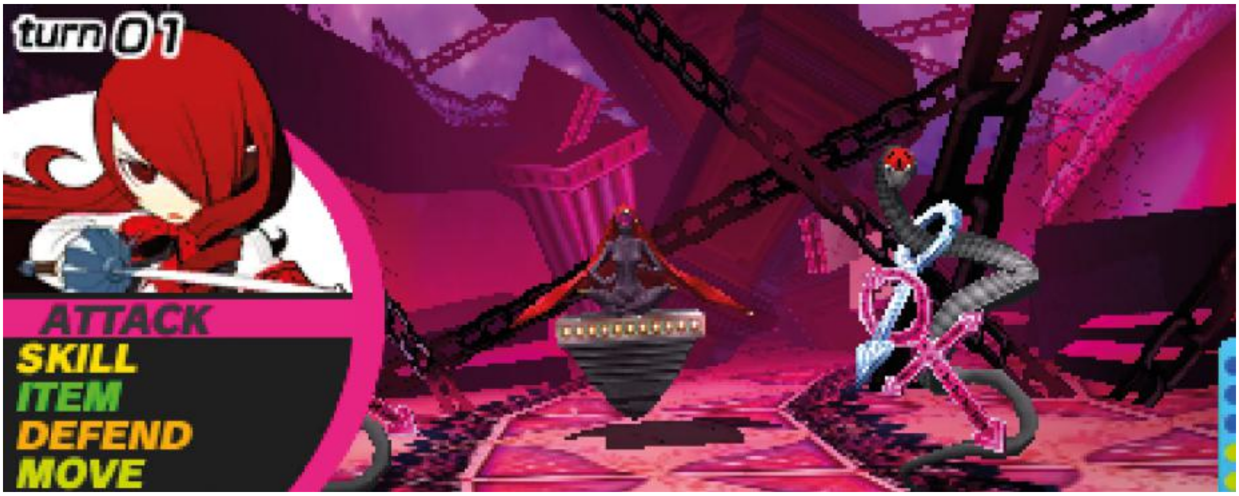
The "rebels fighting against the system" theme hits the right middle ground between the gloominess of the third game and the peppiness of the fourth, but its thematic ambitions are undermined because mainstream JRPGs just aren't equipped to handle it. The first villain, the aforementioned gym teacher, treats his female students as sex objects, which is bad. But then the game does the same thing by dressing the heroine Ann in a fetishy leather suit, despite her protestations, so the messages are mixed. And since the main characters are largely defined by their associations with their villains, their characterisation isn't as strong as in *Persona 4.* (The exception is Futaba, the shut-in teenage girl.) It's still a good cast though – Yusuke the eccentric artist is a standout, and some of the Confidants, like the teacher who moonlights as a maid and the struggling politician, are highlights. In spite of its fumbles, it still plays to the series' strengths, as a super stylish RPG that's approachable without sacrificing depth.



Kawakami

...Wait, you've been here more than six months, huh? Time sure passes more quickly each year...

One of the most scandalous Confidants in *Persona 5* is your teacher, Ms. Kawakami, who moonlights as a maid named Becky, attempting to address the ethical issues of students dating teachers while still indulging in it.



Persona Q (series)

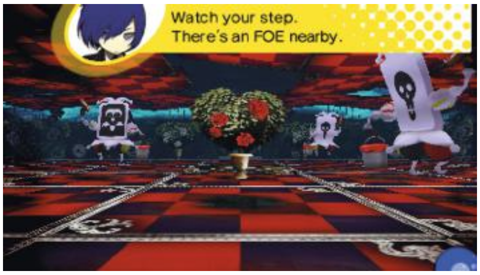
Developer: Atlus/Lancarse | Released: 2014 | Platform(s): 3DS

The *Persona* series began as a first-person dungeon crawler, before ditching this mode for subsequent entries, as it was apparently becoming outdated. So it's ironic that Atlus doubled back to the format for this side series, which is based on their popular *Etrian Odyssey* games. The title makes more sense in its original language – the Japanese title for *Etrian Odyssey* is styled in English as *Sekaiju no MeiQ*, which explains the "*Persona Q*" title.

There are two games in the series, both crossover "festival" titles, in which assorted characters from the later generation of *Persona* games meet. In the first game, you can choose from introductory chapters focusing on either the *Persona 3* or *Persona 4* cast, before they eventually meet up. The story is centred around two mysterious characters named Zen and Rei, who have lost their memories, in a world patterned after Yasogami High from *Persona 4*. Each dungeon is based on a themed exhibit: Alice in Wonderland, a dating cafe, a spooky haunted house, a traditional Japanese festival, and a clock tower. The second game stars the *Persona 5* cast, who are stuck in a movie theatre, as they meet with three more original characters trapped with them, named Hikari, Nagi and Doe. Each dungeon is a parody of a movie genre, including superhero flicks, dinosaur monster movies, sci-fi films, musicals, and documentaries. It also brings in the *Persona 3 Portable* heroine, who was conspicuously absent from the first *Persona Q*.

The dungeon crawling is very much *Etrian Odyssey*, complete with the presence of the vicious FOE monsters, which are initially meant to be avoided rather than confronted directly. The battle system is a sort of blend of its two sources. Five characters are divided up into front and back rows. If you hit an enemy weakness, you'll trigger Boost status for your character, letting them perform moves without HP or MP cost. If multiple characters are Boosted, they can also perform co-op or All-Out Attacks. Though characters are equipped with a main Persona, each can also be customised with assorted sub-Personas, bolstering stats or providing extra attacks. Considering the huge character rosters in both games (even more in the second one), you can create many different types of party, or just concentrate on your favourites.

The stories, however are mostly just loose context allowing everyone to get together – on their own, it isn't very interesting. Since the *Persona Q* titles are aimed at fans who've already completed the main games, there are no real character arcs (and no social elements), so most of them have been reduced to one or two defining characteristics. It's fun to see how the various characters from the different games interact with each other, but otherwise the writing is kind of dim. The cutesy super-deformed art style provides an alternate look for the cast, and the soundtrack draws from many of the styles of the previous games, including new raps by *Persona 3* vocal star Lotus Juice. They're also certainly easier than the *Etrian Odyssey* games, so they're a good introduction to first-person dungeon crawlers.

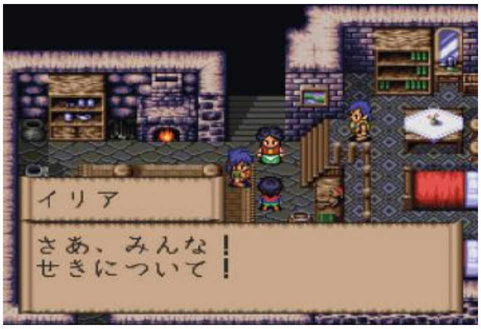

Watch your step.
There's an FOE nearby.

PERSONA Q
NINTENDO 3DS

While it's nice to revisit the heroes of the various *Persona* games in this spinoff series, their personalities have been reduced to one or two singular traits, leading to a lot of jokey dialogue that just isn't very funny.

Last Bible (series)

Developer: Atlus/Multimedia Intelligence Transfer | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): GB, GBC, SFC, GG



イリア

さあ、みんな！
せきについて！

ATLUS
Last Bible III

***Last Bible III* is the nicest-looking of this rather scattershot *Megami Tensei* spinoff sub-series, and also the sole console entry.**

Predating *Pokémon* and developed concurrently with *Shin Megami Tensei, Megami Tensei Gaiden: Last Bible* is a child-friendly interpretation of Atlus' flagship series. It's largely a Japan-only sub-series, though the first game did receive a localised Game Boy Color release titled *Revelations: The Demon Slayer*. Coming out at the height of Pokémania, this dated take on the formula ended up a commercial flop.

The first two *Last Bible* titles were released a scant 11 months apart for the Game Boy. They're fairly similar games that take cues from *Dragon Quest*: our heroes embark across a nondescript fantasy world, allying with both humans and monsters in their quest to vanquish the ultimate evil. The second game gets a little more characterisation, and a plotline focusing on how the heroes on the first game inspired a climate of discrimination and genocide against all monsters, who also largely wish to live in peace. Despite its pedigree, the *Last Bible* series has plenty of mythological figures, along with pulling the bulk of its bestiary from the *Dungeons & Dragons* monster manual. Still, *SMT*'s trademark negotiation and fusion are both here, though in unsurprisingly simplified forms.

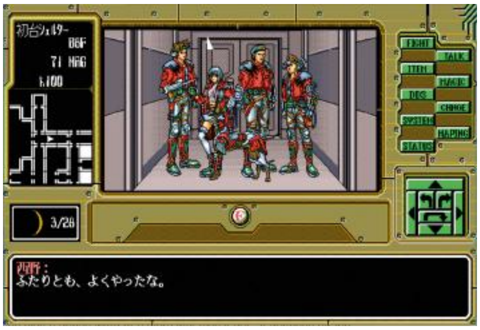
The series made the jump to the Super Famicom in 1995 with *Last Bible III*, which is the series at its best. A more story-centric game, it is set 200,000 years after its predecessors, in a society where humans and monsters live in peace. Ciel and his friends are students of Bulton Magic School, until the Polis government bans the practice of magic on grounds of heresy, which sparks a rebellion. The negotiation and fusion systems have been overhauled nicely, bringing *Last Bible III* closer to *SMT* mechanically, though strangely the plot never seems to want you to spend too much time with your monster pals, constantly filling the party with Ciel's human friends.

Following *Last Bible III*, the series received a pair of oddball side games. The first, *Another Bible*, was released for the Game Boy and developed by HAL subsidiary DICE. It is a strategy game that has virtually nothing to do with *Last Bible* or *SMT*, aside from the ability to recruit monsters. The barebones plot sees heroes Kashiel and Peutia journey from Earth to Heaven to battle the titular bible, a giant book with angry eyes. It's a janky little game, though it has some cool tunes by *Mega Man* composer Manami Matsumae.

More interesting is *Last Bible Special*, published by SEGA for the Game Gear without any involvement from Atlus. Much closer to *SMT* than *Last Bible* proper, *Special* is a hard-as-nails first-person dungeon crawler in which the hero Mahtel traverses Jerusalem to track down and slay the Antichrist. In the mould of *Wizardry*, dungeons are trap-laden, and even early encounters are capable of wiping out the party. Each floor is an increasingly complex maze, and the game can only be saved in town – an unfortunate choice when one considers the Game Gear's poor battery life.

Giten Megami Tensei

Developer: ASCII | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PC98, WIN



西野：
ふたりとも、よくやったな。

ASCII
偽典・女神転生

Without those pesky console censors, this PC-only entry does occasionally find itself in gore-porn territory.

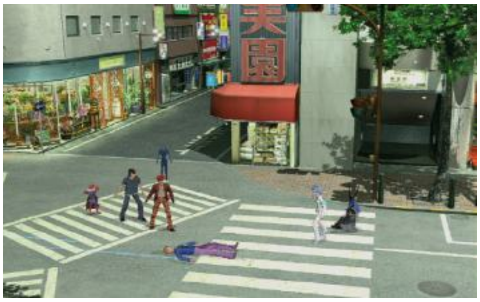
The *Megami Tensei* series began on home consoles, which had to adhere to certain content guidelines. That's definitely not the case for *Giten Megami Tensei: Tokyo Mokushiroku* ("Pseudepigrapha Megami Tensei: Tokyo Apocalypse"). It's dark, gory, and has quite a bit of nudity and sex. The story, for the most part, is typical of the early games in the series – you and your friends are part of a group of Devil Busters, who adventure out from their shelter to explore post-apocalyptic Tokyo. It actually takes place within the timeline of *Shin Megami Tensei,* after the bombs destroyed the city but before the hero reappears. Except that in this game, the heroine is killed and eaten by various monsters right at the beginning. In the course of the story, you track down her body parts, which may allow her to be resurrected.

There are a few key differences from the main games – the mechanics are based on the *Shin Megami Tensei* tabletop RPG, so there are extra statistics as well as drug-related status effects like Trip. This is also the first game in the series in which demons level up, plus they have their own equipment. The high resolution art of the PC games is pretty nice too.

But the game is a nightmare to play. Sadly, it's glitchy, unbalanced, grindy, vague, and monstrously difficult. It also ditches the turn-based system in favour of a pseudo real-time system, but the speed is dictated by your computer's CPU, and if it's too fast, enemies will kill you before you can properly fight. It's only really playable thanks to assorted fan-made patches. The original PC98 version is entirely 2D, while the Windows version features 3D dungeons but still uses 2D sprites.

Shin Megami Tensei NINE

Developer: Atlus/NexTech | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): XB



XBOX
真・女神転生
NINE

As the online component of this release was cancelled, a totally different MMORPG called *Shin Megami Tensei Imagine* was released in 2007, and shut down in 2016.

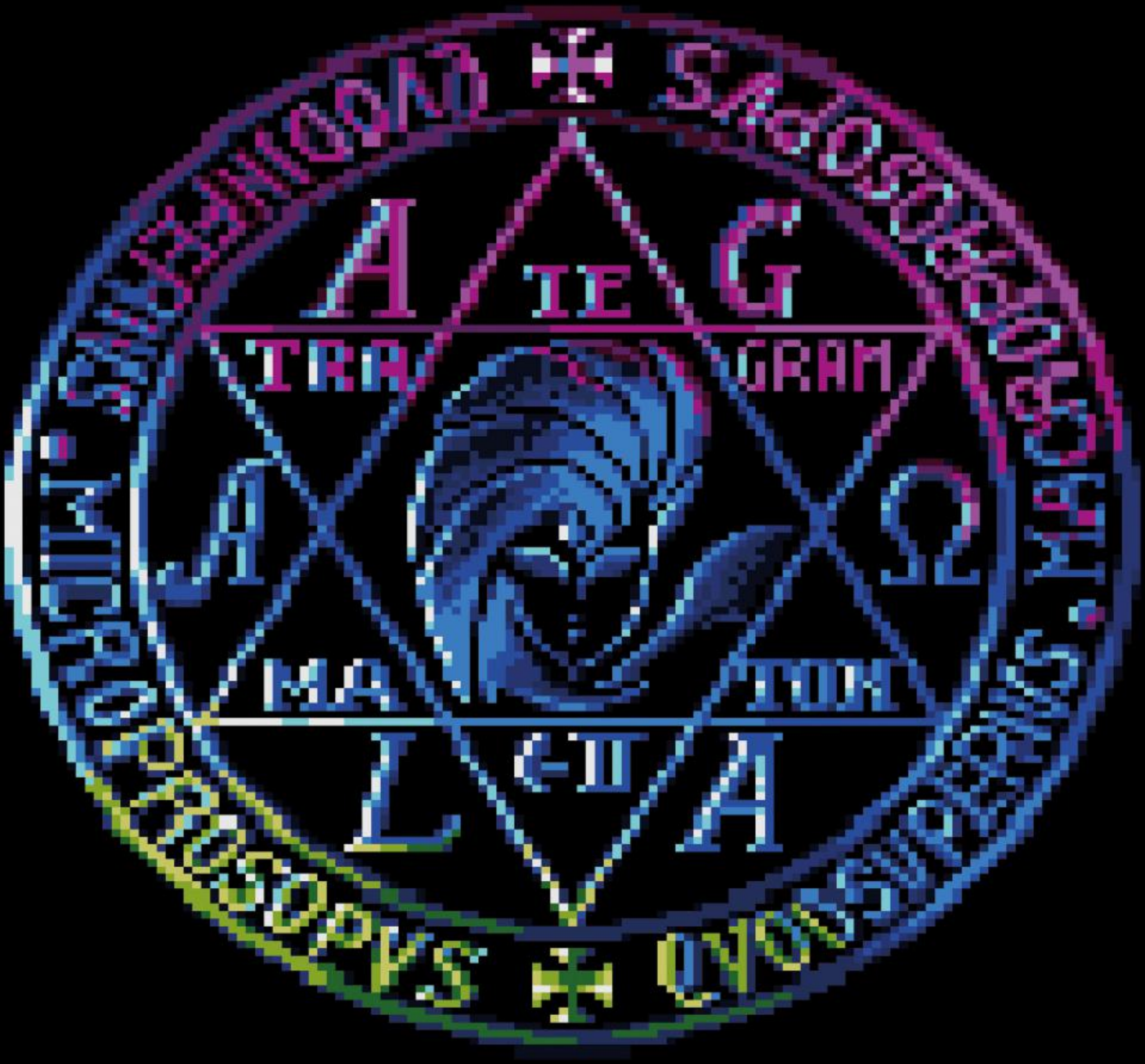
Microsoft made a few early attempts to cater to the Japanese market with the Xbox, and *Shin Megami Tensei NINE* was the first JRPG on the system (and it remained in Japan). The *"NINE"* isn't because it's a numerical entry, but refers to the nine alignments – in addition to the usual Law-Neutral-Chaos of the series, there is also Light-Neutral-Dark, in varying degrees.

Like *Giten Megami Tensei,* the story takes place in the aftermath of Tokyo's destruction. The remaining humans live in underground bunkers, and spend most of their time in Idea Space, a virtual reality recreation of '90s Tokyo. However, irregularities called Noise have begun attacking its users, and can also harm their bodies in the real world, sending them into a coma. You control Kei Azuma, who has joined a squad called Debuggers, tasked with taking them out.

When exploring virtual Tokyo, the backgrounds are pre-rendered but the characters are 3D; humans can be seen wandering around with their monster companions. Battles take place in a 3D cyberspace environment and are mostly automated, though you can intervene with various commands. Whenever you come across a locked door, you can also enter a hacking game, which resembles a simple RTS. Characters don't gain experience; rather, abilities (and the number of demons you can equip) are determined by gems.

The game was intended to have online components – a single player "standalone" version was released, with an online version to follow, but that was cancelled. The game is extremely unpolished, though the tie-ins with the original *Shin Megami Tensei,* particularly in the story and music, are cool.

The logo of the *Shin Megami Tensei* series is striking, though seldom used anymore.


A
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MICROPROSOPUS

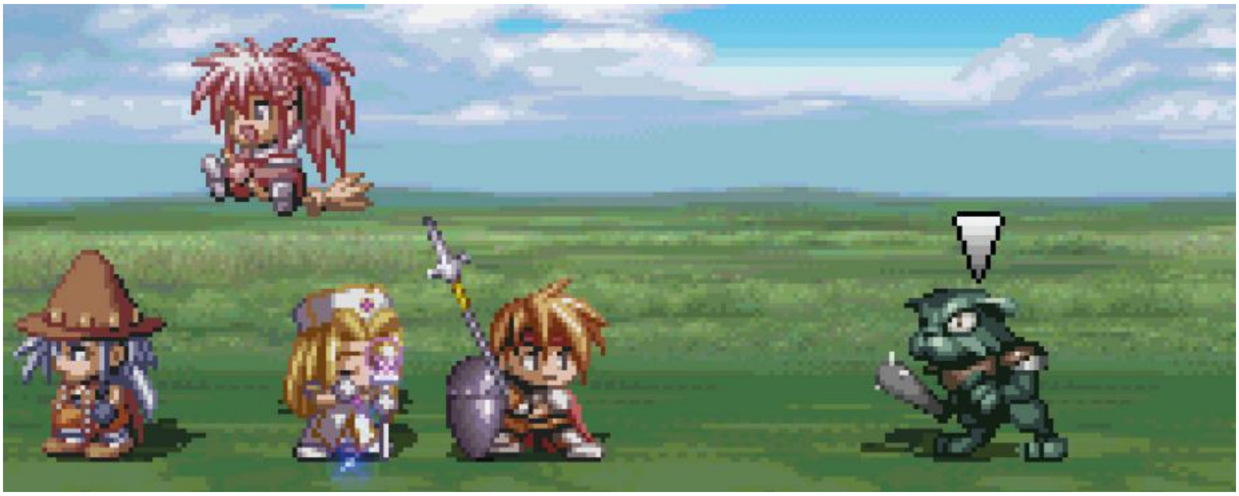
Namco's Tales of … series

Namco is known for all-time classic video games throughout the '80s and '90s, ranging from golden-era arcade classics like *Pac-Man* and *Galaga* to early 3D franchises like *Ridge Racer* and *Tekken*. While other companies jumped onto the RPG bandwagon fairly early on, Namco really only published games by other companies, like Atlus' *Megami Tensei* and Birthday's *Kaijuu Monogatari*. They didn't toss their own hat into the ring until the 1995 Super Famicom title *Tales of Phantasia*. This sparked a franchise that led to 18 entries over the course of 25 years, not including numerous spinoffs. It was initially developed by Wolf Team, a part of Telenet (known for '80s and '90s PC games and some B-grade action games, like *Valis*), which was eventually absorbed by Namco and given the name Namco Tales Studio.

Tales of Phantasia (like all the later games) feels like an anime series in the form of an RPG. To an extent, this sentiment can be applied to most other RPGs as well, but it's true of Namco's series more than most, especially due to its use of opening vocal songs, animated introductions, and casts of popular voice actors. The first game features character artwork by manga artist Kousuke Fujishima, known for *You're Under Arrest* and *Oh My Goddess*, while the next two games (*Destiny* and *Eternia*) feature work by Mutsumi Inomata, who isn't quite as big a star, but provides excellent, attractive art nonetheless. Subsequent games have bounced between these artists, and in some cases, each has provided different characters for the same game. Most of the games in the series are separate, story-wise, from each other, though a few have direct sequels (*Destiny*, *Symphonia*, *Xillia*) and there are some small references that connect some of the games in various ways, not to mention non-canon guest appearances from old heroes and foes.

Of course, with so many games in the series, they do tend to blend together. For a period of time, *Tales* was nearly annually produced, alternating between various development studios, often with varying results in quality. The world designs tend to be generic anime fantasy, the storylines themselves tend to suffer from narrative issues, and as the series went on, the lack of development time and budget clearly showed. But they excel for two main reasons: fast and fun real-time battle sequences (initially presented as side-scrolling 2D in the early games, before shifting to 3D later on), and a roster of fun, likeable characters. Most games feature numerous optional "skits" in which the cast chats about the events of the story, providing characterisation and fleshing out the game world. There are numerous spoken win quotes after each battle, a small detail that adds a lot of personality. Add in regular series features, like a cooking system, a Title system where characters get nicknames (and potentially stat changes) based on their actions, plenty of bonus mini-games, and cameos from other Namco games, and it's easy to see how the series has retained an enthusiastic fanbase, in spite of its ups and downs over the years.

Key to the *Tales* games is the real-time battle system, making fights a little more exciting.



Tales of Phantasia

Developer: Namco/Wolf Team | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC, PS1, GBA, PSP

Tales of Phantasia begins when young swordsman Cless (also spelled Cress) and his buddy Chester go out for a pleasant hunt in the woods. But then the alarm bell from town sounds – it's been invaded by enemies, and everyone except them is tragically slain. The perpetrators seek Cless' pendant, passed down from his forefathers, which is a key to resurrecting the demon lord Dhaos, sealed away 100 years prior, as shown in the game's prologue. Dhaos' power transcends time itself, so the heroes must travel to the past (and then the future) in order to be able to beat him.

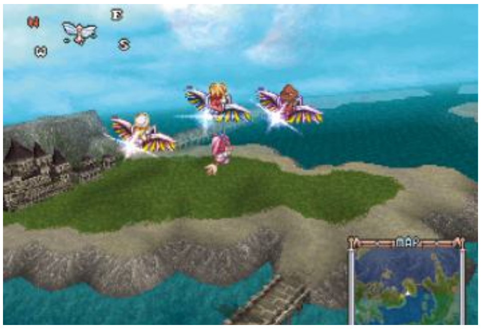
Despite the time-travelling theme, *Tales of Phantasia* isn't exactly *Chrono Trigger*, as the various eras of the land of Aselia don't really show any drastic changes. In many ways, its story is still fairly typical for an RPG of the era, right down to a quest featuring the four elements, as well as the presence of a life-giving tree. This is, of course, Yggdrasil, and the story features a number of references to Norse mythology, even if they're often misused. But the story is so effective because of the characters, which have consistently shown themselves to be the *Tales*' series biggest strengths. Cless is a likeable protagonist with an affection for puns, who ends up caught in a love triangle between the sweet, shy priestess Mint and the boisterous, upbeat half-elf (and pseudo-witch, given her flying broom) Arche. The cast is rounded out by Cless' lifelong archer buddy Chester and moody but cool scholar Claus. Dhaos is one of the great RPG villains, presented as a tragic figure with his own motivations, beyond just "power" or "insanity".

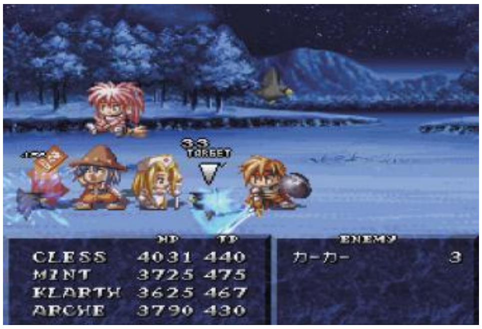
Many games in the *Tales* series feature what it calls the Linear Motion Battle System – there are random encounters, in which combat is action-based and viewed from the side-on perspective.

アナウンス
『マザーコンピュータルームへようこそ』

This isn't technically a new thing – older games like *Zelda II* did something similar – but was quite novel for a 16-bit RPG; other games typically kept to a command-based menu. The execution is also a little different, particularly in the default Semi-Auto setting, in which hitting the attack button will send Cless automatically running up to an enemy, hitting them, then running back. (An optional item will give more direct control of the hero.) In order to really do damage, you need to string together regular attacks with special moves called Artes, fueled by Technique Points (TP), which can be assigned four at a time and activated by pressing the special button and holding a direction (or leaving it in neutral). Additionally, the other three party members are controlled by an AI, so you can work in conjunction with their attacks to string together combos, inflicting maximal damage while preventing enemies from counter-attacking. In its initial implementation here, it's a little stiff, and many fights can devolve into button-mashing, but it is more viscerally stimulating than most RPGs of the era, even if it doesn't exactly challenge the brain.

***Tales of Phantasia* was one of the last great RPGs on the Super Famicom, before most developers shifted to the PlayStation. The vocals in the opening song are a technical marvel.**





namco
TALES OF PHANTASIA

The PlayStation port of *Tales of Phantasia* is generally regarded as the best version.

Since the game was released as the Super Famicom was entering its twilight years, and competing against 32-bit CD-based platforms like the PlayStation, it's also a bit of a technical marvel. It uses 48 Mb of ROM, a huge amount of space, more typical of fighting games, and much of that is used for the game's digitised speech. Most of this is assorted battle cries, but a full vocal song is also featured in the intro, entitled "Yume wa Owaranai" ("The Dream Will Never End"). The soundtrack, by Wolf Team regulars Motoi Sakuraba and Shinji Tamura, is also well rounded, though the battle themes in particular stand out.

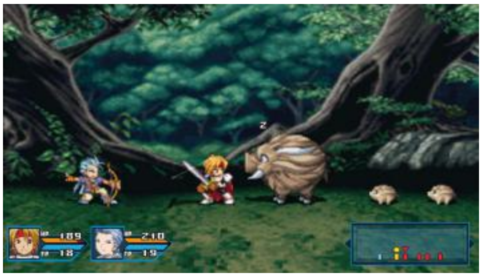
While many later entries refine both the battle mechanics and the storytelling, *Tales of Phantasia* is still a pretty fun game, especially because of its characters. As a late-era 16-bit RPG, it's an easy one to return to, to re-experience the origins of the series, compared to the harsher initial entries in other series like *Final Fantasy* or *Dragon Quest*.

Tales of Phantasia was remade for the PlayStation just three years after its initial Super Famicom release. In many ways, this brought it up to the level of its PS1 sequel, *Tales of Destiny* – it contains a refined battle system that strengthens the supporting characters and adds in multiplayer support, an implementation of *Tales*' signature "skits", improved visuals (including sprites that more closely match Fujishima's artwork and a 3D overworld) and sound, an FMV anime intro, an extra playable character in the form of ninja girl Suzu Fujibayashi, and other enhancements. This is considered the best version of the game.

Unfortunately neither of these versions got localised – the Super Famicom version came too late in the system's life to be commercially viable, and Namco likely skipped over the PlayStation version due to the tepid reaction in North America to *Tales of Destiny*. Both have been fan translated, though the Super Famicom version, localised by DeJap, takes enormous liberties with the script by embellishing it with plenty of adult humour. Meanwhile, the PlayStation version is not only more faithful, but goes the extra mile by subtitling the speech, something the official localisation of *Destiny* didn't bother with.

The first official localisation of *Tales of Phantasia* popped up for the Game Boy Advance, released to tie in with *Tales of Symphonia* on the GameCube. This is mostly based on the Super Famicom version, with some aspects from the PlayStation version, like its revamped sprites and playable Suzu. Unfortunately, this port is fairly poor, as the battles are comparatively sluggish. The localisation has assorted problems too – it removes the intro vocal song, all of the vocal clips have been re-recorded in English with both terrible voice acting and bad sound quality, and there's an infamous mistake, whereby it translates the term "Ragnarok" as "Kangaroo".

The game also showed up twice for the PlayStation Portable – first as the *Full Voice Edition*, which adds in much more spoken dialogue, then bundled as an extra with the spinoff *Tales of Phantasia: Narikiri Dungeon X*, the extra including the spinoff's character Rondoline, as a bonus. These versions have assorted tweaks – the character sprites have been redone again but they're too tall, and the action no longer freezes during spell-casting. While this was done for consistency with later games, it also messes up the balance. The other ports aren't awful, but there's enough jankiness to them that the PlayStation release is preferable. The PSP versions were used as the basis for the smartphone game, which was released in English as a free-to-play game (save points cost money), though since the servers were disabled in 2014, it is no longer playable.



The PSP port marks the second time the battle sprites were changed, this time to match *Tales of Eternia*, but they look incongruous up against the enemies.

Tales of Destiny (series)

Developer: Namco | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2, PSP

Tales of Destiny
PlayStation
namco

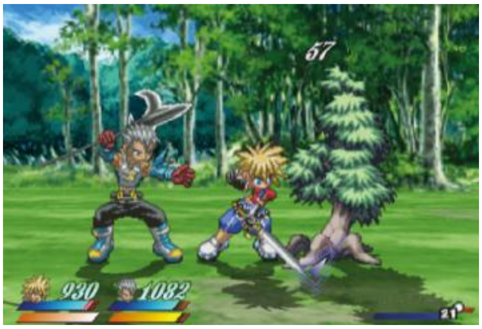
Released only months after *Final Fantasy VII, Tales of Destiny* did little to show the Western audience why they should care about the *Tales* series, as it appeared quite old-fashioned.

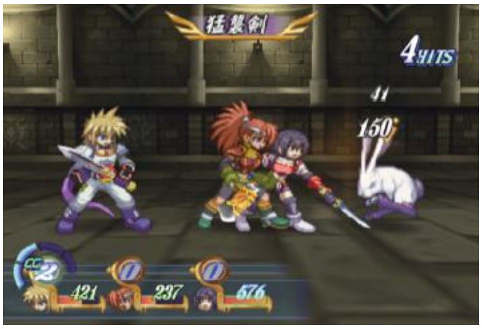
In the world of *Tales of Destiny*, there are sentient swords called Swordians, who fought in the ancient Aeth'er Wars. They have slept for thousands of years, only awakening in a time of need, and only certain humans can hear them. One of those humans happens to be Stahn, a simple country boy who gets swept up by a grand adventure to hunt down the Eye of Atamoni, a powerful relic from the Aeth'er Wars.

While *Tales of Phantasia* pushed the boundaries of the Super Famicom to their limits, *Tales of Destiny* is fairly unambitious in what it does with the PlayStation. Other than the increased sprite detail, it looks and plays more or less identically to its predecessor, though it does have an FMV anime cutscene with a vocal track supplied by J-pop band Deen. It also introduces optional little interludes where the main characters chat about their situations on the world map, done entirely with spoken dialogue. While *Tales of Destiny* was released in North America, both the vocal song and these interludes were cut out entirely – the former likely for licensing reasons, the latter because Namco had opted not to hire English voice actors (or add subtitles). These cuts, along with some mediocre writing, really harm the localised version of the game.

This being the second entry, the combat is still a little rough, and the enemies are pretty dumb, making it kinda boring. This is the first entry that allows multiple players, though, as the entire party can be controlled by human players, providing you have a multitap. The story is not quite as compelling as *Phantasia's*, but it does contain likeable characters. Stahn is a bit of a naive doofus, who often exchanges barbs with Rutee, a sharp-tongued thief. Mary is Rutee's partner in crime, fitting into the rare "strong swordswoman" archetype, while the priestess Philia is a more typical soft-spoken female, à la Mint. There's also Leon, initially an antagonist, whom the heroes are forced to join up with, whose brooding mannerisms and tragic story have helped make him the most popular character in the game. Kousuke Fujishima did not return to do the art; instead the reins were handed to Mutsumi Inomata, and while her artwork isn't quite on the same level (it gets better in later entries), the super-deformed sprites still look as goofily likeable as before.

After *Tales of Destiny*, Namco continued with a whole new story and cast of characters in *Tales of Eternia* (released as *Tales of Destiny II* in North America), before returning to the story to create a direct sequel. As the fourth entry in the mainline series and the first on the PlayStation 2, *Tales of Destiny 2* takes place about 15 years down the line. The main character is Kyle, the son of Rutee and Stahn, who desperately wants to be a hero like his father, who set off on a journey when Kyle was very young; he hasn't been seen since. He and his adopted brother Rodi discover a mysterious girl in





PlayStation.2
Tales of Destiny 2
namco

The screenshots above left are from *Tales of Destiny 2* and the *Tales of Destiny* remake, both of which use large sprites for their characters in battle.

some ancient ruins, who's muttering something about looking for a hero. They join together as they rise to the occasion, which puts them at odds with Elrane, the human manifestation of the goddess Fortuna. Their actions create a split timeline, requiring them to go back to the past to fix it, during which Kyle learns the sacrifices required to be a true hero.

JRPGs are stereotyped as having teenage characters talking about justice and heroism and such, and *Tales of Destiny 2* is one of the purest examples of this kind of thing. Kyle is super-enthusiastic, but he's also kind of a dingus. Other aspects of the plot are kinda dumb too – there's a character named Judas who is very obviously just Leon in a mask (who shows up here for reasons that aren't initially clear), and the time travel plot was already done, and done much better, in *Tales of Phantasia*.

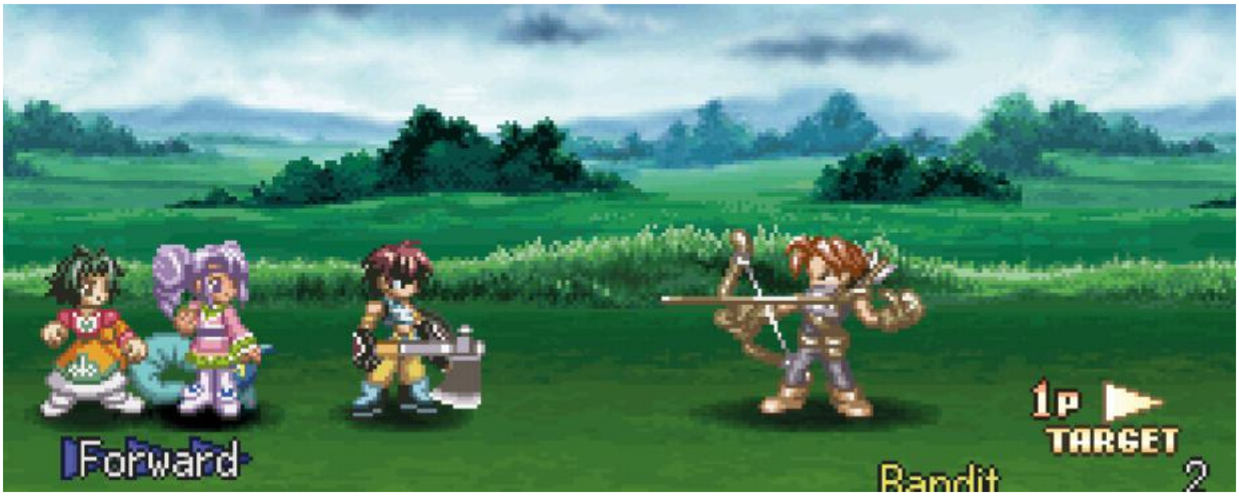
Visually, it's an evolution of *Tales of Eternia*, using sprites on 2D backgrounds, but the higher resolution allows for a greater level of detail. (The world map is totally 3D though, and does not look great.) These larger, more detailed sprites greatly improve the battle system over its PlayStation era counterpart. The camera also zooms in and out as the player character moves towards the enemies, the combat is even smoother, and the whole thing feels like an SNK fighting game.

It also handles the criticism that previous games were too button-mashy by implementing a Spirit Points (SP) gauge. Every attack will drain the SP gauge a bit, so you'll need to retreat for a few moments to recharge when it gets low. TP is also handled differently, as it now maxes out at 100, and regenerates as you use regular attacks. As a result, you can use Artes without being concerned about TP running out, because you just recharge it, though there are still restoratives if you want to replenish it immediately. In order to ensure that your characters are facing enemies head on, if you try to run around and attack them from the back, you'll be subjected to an SP penalty. There's also a hidden gauge that increases as you attack, which, when maxed out, will engage the Spirit Blaster mode, which allows you to attack without losing SP. This is found in many later games under different names, though usually with an on-screen indicator, and player control over its activation. This is also the first game in the series to implement the Grade function, giving you a score at the end of each encounter. When you complete the game, you can use those points at the Grade shop to unlock various features for subsequent runs.

Overall, the story is rather dumb but the battle system is super fun, which applies to a lot of the later games in the *Tales* series. Alas, Namco didn't feel that the 2D entries would appeal to overseas fans, so none of these were localised into English. Which is, of course, unfortunate, because the battle systems are the best of them – they have a subtly different feel from the 3D games that makes them feel tighter, despite their mechanical similarity.

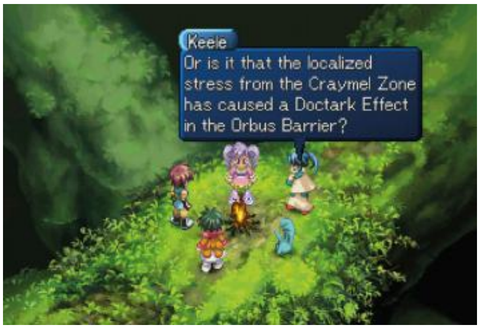
After continuing the 2D *Tales* line with *Tales of Rebirth*, the series doubled back with a remake of the original *Tales of Destiny*. This is a ground-up remake, implementing many aspects of the other 2D PlayStation games, the major difference being that the field backgrounds are 3D, though the characters are still sprites. Much of the script has been expanded too, with much more voice acting than was present in the original game. Some of the characterisations have changed, though, to match how they were represented in *Tales of Destiny 2* – primarily Stahn, whose dumbness has been played up beyond the original "simple country bumpkin" persona. Stahn's younger sister Lily, who existed in the original game's code but was left unused, is now playable too.

However, the biggest improvement is the battle system. This game introduces the Chain Capacity (CC) system, which totally eliminates the concept of TP. Instead, you can create combos, using regular attacks or Artes however you want, though the length of the combo is capped at a certain level, determined by your equipment. After the combo is completed, it replenishes almost instantly, though the cap resets at a higher or lower limit. As such, the kind of combos you can perform is constantly in flux. Many later *Tales* entries use this system, with various tweaks. In addition to this, there's a super-fun mid-air combat system whereby you can leap and attack enemies in mid-air. As with the later *Tales* games, you can also command characters other than Stahn. The *Director's Cut* re-release includes some tweaks and additions, but, most importantly, includes a new scenario starring Leon, though it's only a few hours long.



Tales of Eternia

Developer: Namco | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS1, PSP


Keele
Or is it that the localized stress from the Craymel Zone has caused a Doctark Effect in the Orbus Barrier?

PlayStation
Tales of Destiny II
namco

Namco gave *Tales* another shot in North America with this entry, but it still didn't make much of a mark.

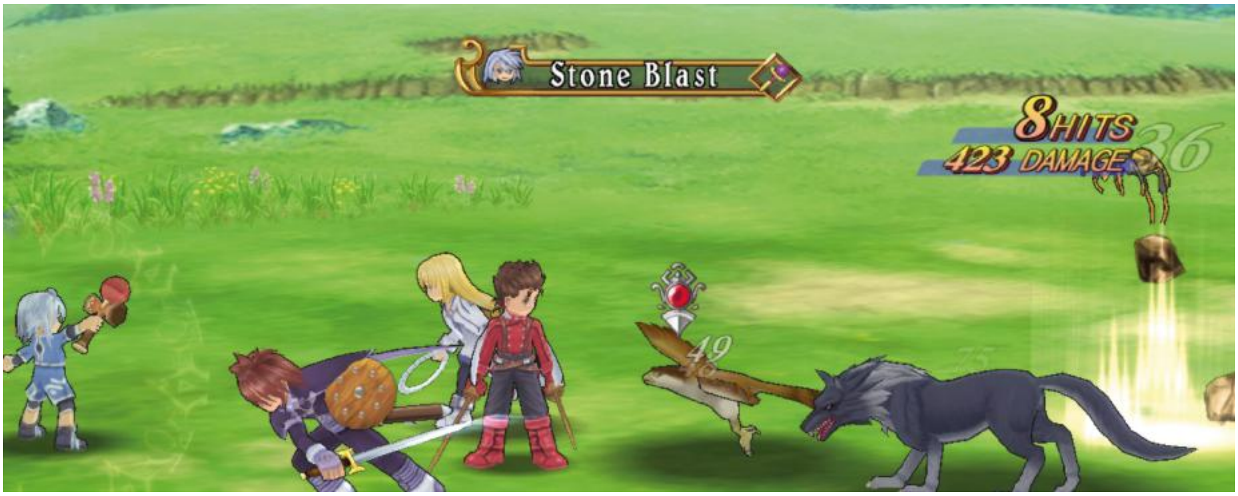
The title of this game is rather confusing – in Japan, it's known as *Tales of Eternia*, but for the North American PlayStation release, it was retitled *Tales of Destiny II*, even though its storyline is not related. Later on, Namco actually did release a direct sequel called *Tales of Destiny 2* (which was unlocalised), but this book will refer to this title by its original name.

The twin worlds of Inferia and Celestia lie right next to each – look to the sky of one and you can see the other gazing back. But in spite of their proximity, the people of the two planets have not interacted in thousands of years. That is, until a girl named Meredy crashlands onto Inferia, where she's picked up by two hunters, Reid and Farah. After breaking the language barrier, Meredy reveals she's from Celestia and brings bad tidings – the barrier that divides the two worlds is collapsing, and if something isn't done, they'll crash into and destroy each other. Eventually, the crew learn to travel between the planets, and stop the forces that threaten to doom everything.

Tales of Destiny felt like a slightly souped-up Super Famicom game, while *Tales of Eternia* feels like a legitimate PlayStation release. The backgrounds are now fully illustrated, like most other PS1 RPGs, and while the art isn't as lovely as that in *Legend of Mana* or *SaGa Frontier 2*, it's still quite pretty. It comes on three CDs, featuring some FMV cutscenes and substantially expanded voice acting, which was previously primarily confined to battles and skits. The downsides are that much of the pre-rendered video has aged poorly, and that while Namco was kind enough to actually translate the English dialogue this time instead of just hacking it out, the voice acting is mediocre at the best of times. The characters also have slightly more normal proportions in battle, ditching the super-deformed sprites of the last two games.

The battle sequences have been improved substantially, in both presentation and control. They simply feel much smoother than before, and have tighter formation control for your allies, as well as a scoring system to grant bonuses, a feature carried forward to subsequent *Tales* games. The story and characters are okay, though neither the personalities nor designs stand out very much. The game does introduce the cutesy animal mascot in the form of Meredy's squirrel-like pet Quickie, as well as having a propensity for gibberish to flesh out the world's science, mostly spewed by the nerdy scholar Keele.

Tales of Eternia is a sort of stopgap in the larger context of the series, because while it's an improvement (at least in mechanics and presentation), most of its sequels do everything this game does, but better. The game received a PSP port early in the system's life. Other than adding in widescreen and making the battles smoother, not much was really changed. Its only English release was in Europe, since Sony of America frowned on 32-bit ports that didn't add much new content.



Tales of Symphonia (series)

Developer: Namco | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): GC, PS2, WII, PS3, WIN

Tales of Symphonia focuses on a girl named Colette, who's chosen to recharge the world with mana, and initially takes her friend Lloyd with her on this journey. However, it's eventually revealed that the quest is something far darker than she had anticipated.

This, the fifth *Tales* game, is an important entry for the series. It featured the return of character designer Kousuke Fujishima, who had sat out for every game since *Phantasia*. It was basically a relaunch for the series in North America, as both *Destiny* and *Eternia* had been flops, and Nintendo put quite a bit of marketing behind it, as it was one of the first original JRPGs for the GameCube. As the first in the series to go 3D, it also established the look and feel for most of the subsequent entries.

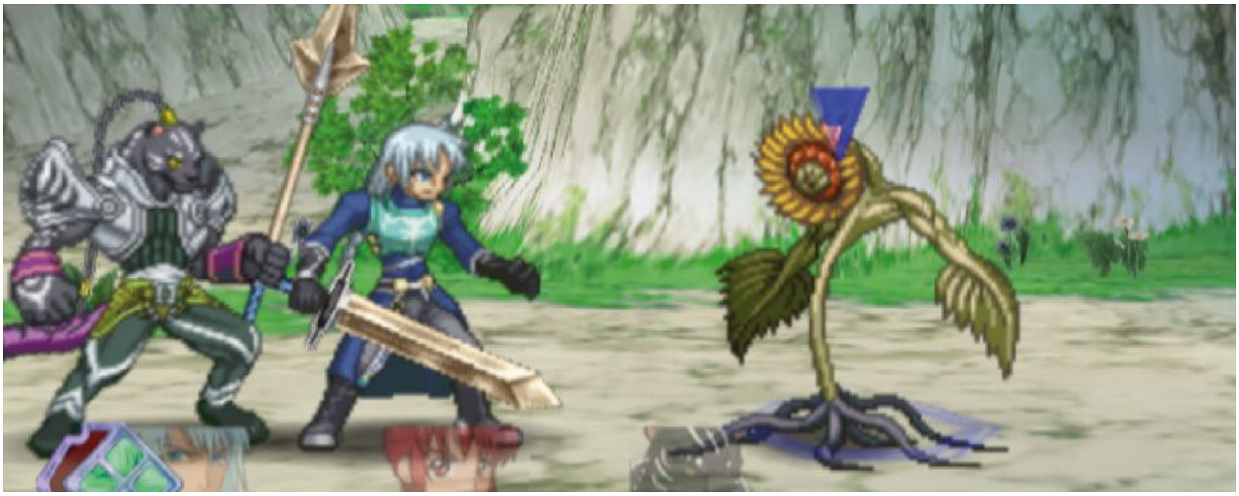
While the battles takes place on a 3D field, you can only move forwards and backwards in relation to your targetted enemy. The camera is more dynamic, though, zooming in and out and allowing you to get a better view of the action. There are some new abilities, like the Over Limit gauge to temporarily increase power (a modified version of the Spirit Blaster from *Destiny 2*) and Unison Attacks to join forces with other characters.

The cel-shaded visuals are excellent, though the proportions of the models make many of them look childlike. The story, for better or worse, is the kind that the *Tales* series would become known for – an interesting premise and some fun characters (the smarmy, womanising Zelos, the mysterious and powerful swordsman Kratos, the ninja magician Sheena) but these are balanced out by some annoying ones (the ditzy Colette, the child genius Genis) as well as some slow pacing and tedious padding. The story later introduces parallel worlds, and deals (clumsily) with themes like racism, though it does tie in eventually to *Phantasia*, at least. There's also a hidden affinity system that determines Lloyd's relationship with the rest of the party, affecting certain events. The localisation is generally well done, though the opening song was changed and the skits were left unvoiced. A later PS2 port released only in Japan adds some extra content, but halves the frame rate of the battles to 30 FPS, so they don't feel as smooth.

Colette the Chosen of Regeneration.

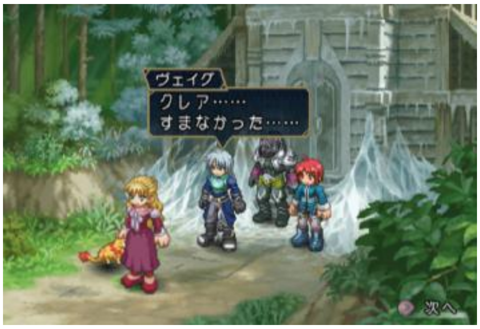
Symphonia received a direct sequel for the Wii, called *Dawn of the New World*. It stars two new characters, Emil and Marta, and takes place two years after the first game. It focuses on a tree spirit named Ratatosk, which has been causing chaos. Emil believes that Lloyd murdered his parents, but what begins as a quest for vengeance ends up much larger. While some of the extra party slots are taken up by characters from the original, for much of the time you'll be fighting alongside monsters that you've recruited. Unfortunately, much of this entry is fairly poor. The visuals ditch the cel-shaded look, and it looks much worse. The new characters are awful and the returning ones are butchered; much of the game feels redundant. Both *Symphonia* games were bundled together for an HD port on the PlayStation 3. The first entry is based on the PS2 version, so it's also stuck with 30 FPS battles, though it brings back the original opening song and the option for Japanese voices.

Since the PlayStation *Tales* games were widely overlooked, *Symphonia* is seen as one of the establishing games of the series in North America.



Tales of Rebirth

Developer: Namco | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): PS2, PSP



ヴェイグ
クレア……
すまなかった……

PlayStation.2
Tales of Rebirth
namco

Tales of Rebirth takes place in a world inhabited by Huma (humans) and Gajuma (beastmen), who have coexisted peacefully for a number of years. However, when the King passes away mysteriously, it causes an awakening in many humans, granting them magical Force powers previously known only to Gajuma. These newfound abilities have tragic consequences, as the users can't always control them properly; the hero, Veigue, learns this quickly when he accidentally encases his girlfriend Claire in ice. A year passes and some adventurers free her, but before a happy reunion can take place, she is kidnapped by the princess Agarte, who has her own plans for the kingdom.

While previous *Tales* games had themes involving racism, they're at the core of *Tales of Rebirth*. The story is not bad, though there are some notable homages to (or perhaps rip-offs of) various chapters of the manga *JoJo's Bizarre Adventures*. Veigue is also a pretty boring protagonist – he barely speaks, and fans have noted that a disproportionate amount of his dialogue is him shouting his girlfriend's name.

The story is not really the main draw of this game though; rather, its strengths lie in its battle system. It's 2D and can be seen as a follow-up to *Tales of Destiny 2*, as it was designed by the same staff. The key difference is that the field is split up into three tiers that you can leap between, à la *Guardian Heroes*, which gives some versatility as to how you can approach and surround enemies. The TP system is gone too, and instead each of your four skills is governed by an individual Force Gauge, which determines its strength and replenishes automatically. Additionally, there's a Rush Gauge shared among the cast, which measures their emotional tension, increased by undertaking aggressive actions and decreased by taking defensive ones. This has various effects that can include increasing strength but lowering defence, and managing it is extremely important. But the most unusual change is that there is no healing magic, and healing items, particularly at the beginning, are very sparse. Instead, HP is replenished when using a special attack while its Force Gauge is maxed out, giving you the opportunity to regain lost health based on how you fight. This is also heavily influenced by the Rush Gauge, as you won't gain as much HP if it's too high. Along with this, you can tweak HP recovery distribution so the other characters can regain health at different rates.

Tales games tend to get divided up into "story" games and "battle" games, based on where their strengths lie, and this is definitely one of the latter. It's a little tough to wrap your head around at first, but once you fully understand it, it's one of the best in the series. Despite a PSP re-release a few years down the line, and much like the *Destiny* sequel and remake, no localisation was granted, as Namco wasn't doing this for 2D entries then, so it is mostly unknown to the English speaking audience.

Tales of Rebirth **is another 2D PlayStation 2 entry, and as such was passed over for localisation, but the battle system is fun as heck, like the others of its ilk.**

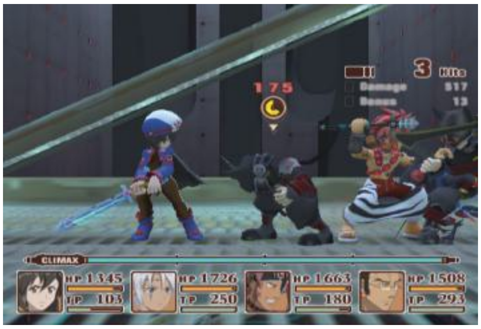
Tales of Legendia

Developer: Namco | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): PS2

Tales of Legendia is sort of the bastard stepchild among the PS2 games in the series. It was made by an in-house group called Project MelFes, a collection of not only Tales developers, but members of the *Tekken* and *SoulCalibur* teams as well. This gives its combat system a unique identity, differing from the series' sixth-gen releases, switching out the more open ended arenas for a 2D plane to duke it out on. Titled X-LMBS (Crossover Linear Motion Battle System), this tweaked system is meant to mimic the feel of a 2D fighting game, that point being made clear by lead hero Senel fighting with fists and pulling off moves that wouldn't be out of place on a shoto character. With this, you're in the thick of the action, and encouraged to create large combos with the Eres system. Think magic spells, but contextualised as fighting game special moves. Senel can also pick up and throw enemies around the field, knocking over other enemies, which is pretty fun! Additionally, there's a climax bar that builds during fights and can be spent to freeze enemies for a short time, giving you a chance at a free damaging combo.

It's one of the most unique systems in the whole series, though it is quite contentious among series fans – it feels a little restrictive, it runs at a low (30 FPS) frame rate, and it returns to the random encounters that other *Tales* games had gotten away from by this point. Indeed, this feels closer to one of the PS1 entries than the PS2 ones.

The bigger problem is that *Legendia*'s narrative is bare bones, starting off on a simple and uninteresting note, with you on a mysterious island (actually a ship from an ancient civilisation), looking for Senel's missing sister Shirley, who clearly has some kind of strange power. As is typical for *Tales* games, the characters are kinda fun, but the overall story is not that great.



The structure is also pretty odd, as the main story resolves in the first half of the game, while the second half focuses on the characters' individual stories and finishes up some plot threads. This character focus sounds great on paper, but in practice, this part of the game just involves playing through repeated dungeons, where nothing too significant happens for long stretches, plus the English version had the voices in these sections cut out.

For a roughly 40-hour JRPG, this is a massive problem, and has caused *Legendia* to be ranked low among many *Tales* fans, constantly overshadowed by *Symphonia* and *Abyss* – and rightfully so: in many ways it feels like a step back from those. At the very least, it's fun to play in a way the rest of the series never attempted. It also stands out for its character designs by Kazuto Nakazawa (*Samurai Champloo*), which look quite different from the other games', and the brilliant soundtrack by Go Shiina, who goes for a more orchestral style, compared to Motoi Sakuraba's prog rock themes. With Namco seemingly having no interest in ever revisiting the unique battle system, *Legendia* is still worth looking at, if only for its novelty.

PlayStation.2
Tales of Legendia
namco

***Legendia* is one of the weaker PS2 *Tales* games, and there is of course some bitterness that this was localised when none of the 2D games had been.**

Tales of the Abyss

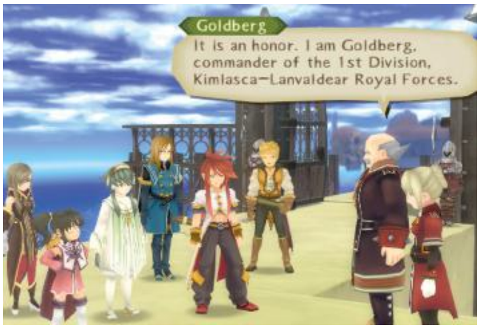
Developer: Namco | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): PS2, 3DS

Luke fon Fabre is the spoiled noble of the kingdom of Kimlasca, who has barely set foot outside of his manor. Until one day, an assailant whisks him out into the real world and far into enemy territory, forcing him to come to terms with his responsibilities, as well as his mysterious past.

The politics of the world in *Tales of the Abyss* are quite intriguing – there are two nations, Malkuth and Kimlasca, struggling to maintain control over the Score, a record of history and prophecy. Not only do regular people worship it as literally gospel, but it's believed that whoever possesses full knowledge of the Score can crush their enemies. A neutral entity, the religious Order of Lorelei, acts as a mediator, but they are subject to corruption, and Luke's disappearance begins a cavalcade of events that break the peace.

It's a great story, somewhat poorly told, thanks to the overwhelming use of confusing names and terms, especially in the early part of the game, so it's hard to figure out who is allied with what. It's further complicated by the game's magic, referred to as Fonons, for which every explanation sounds like gibberish. It's also badly paced, as you visit the entire map fairly early on, meaning that many scenarios involve tediously slogging between towns or running through already visited dungeons. Combining this with an unnecessary third act makes much of it drag on.

Thankfully, as with many other *Tales* games, the story thrives thanks to its characters. Luke is a comically jerkish lout at the outset, but major events cause him to mature fairly quickly. Tear, the female assailant who kidnaps him, is a typical tsundere but makes for an endearing love interest, while his betrothed, Natalia of the kingdom of Kimlasca, is a suitable foil. The cast is rounded out with Guy, Luke's best buddy, and Anise, a young girl comically obsessed with status and money. But the standout is the dark magician Jade, whose sarcastically detached nature make him an unusual ally. The party dynamics in *Abyss* are rather uncommon, since many of them are hostile towards Luke or betray the party at some point, though the narrative requires they be forgiven almost immediately.



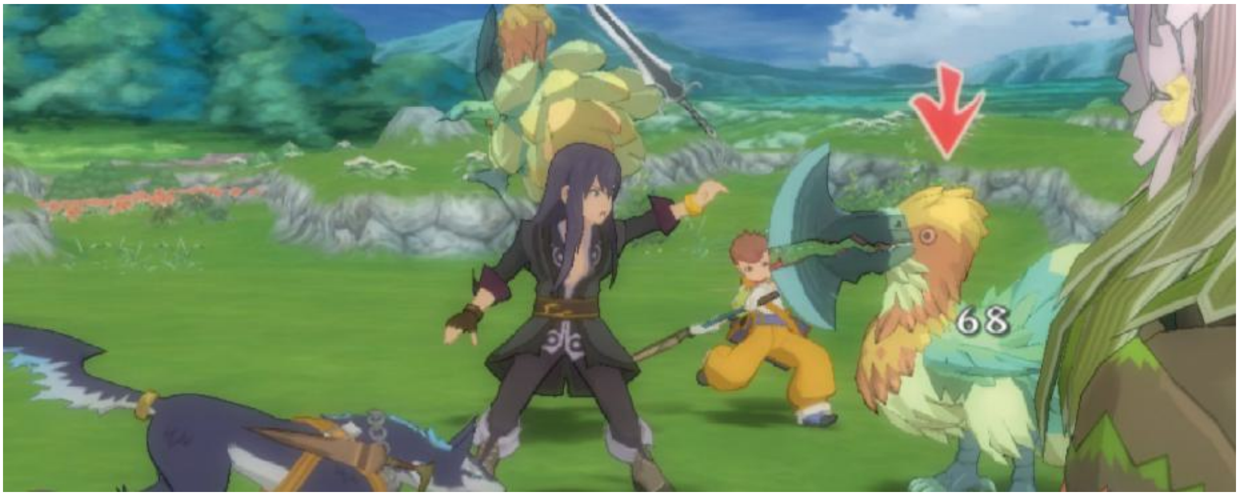
Goldberg

It is an honor. I am Goldberg, commander of the 1st Division, Kimlasca–Lanvaldear Royal Forces.

The visuals are similar to those in *Symphonia*, though they lose the cel-shading, and characters are proportioned to look less like children. The battle system now allows you to run around the field instead of just towards targetted enemies, which makes it feel far less restrictive. There's an overcomplicated system in which other party members can leave elemental circles on the ground for you to stand in and launch super attacks, but the fights are rarely hard enough that you'll need them; similarly, a customisation system regarding elements is largely unnecessary. *Tales of the Abyss* doesn't quite come together – it's a good story, badly told – but the interesting backdrop and the lively cast keep things interesting, even when parts of the journey become a slog.

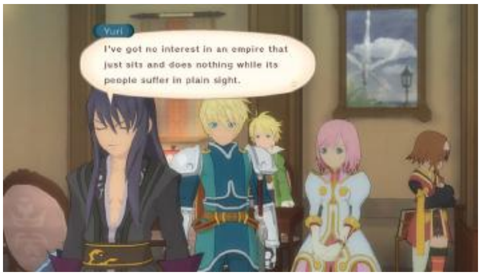
PlayStation 2
TALES OF THE ABYSS

JRPGs tend to be stereotyped as being about "the power of friendship" and *Tales of the Abyss* is most definitely not that.



Tales of Vesperia

Developer: Namco | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): X360, PS3, PS4, XB1, NSW, WIN



I've got no interest in an empire that just sits and does nothing while its people suffer in plain sight.

Yuri is regarded as one of the best protagonists in the series, because who doesn't love a rogue-ish do-gooder? The fantastic voice performance by Troy Baker doesn't hurt either.

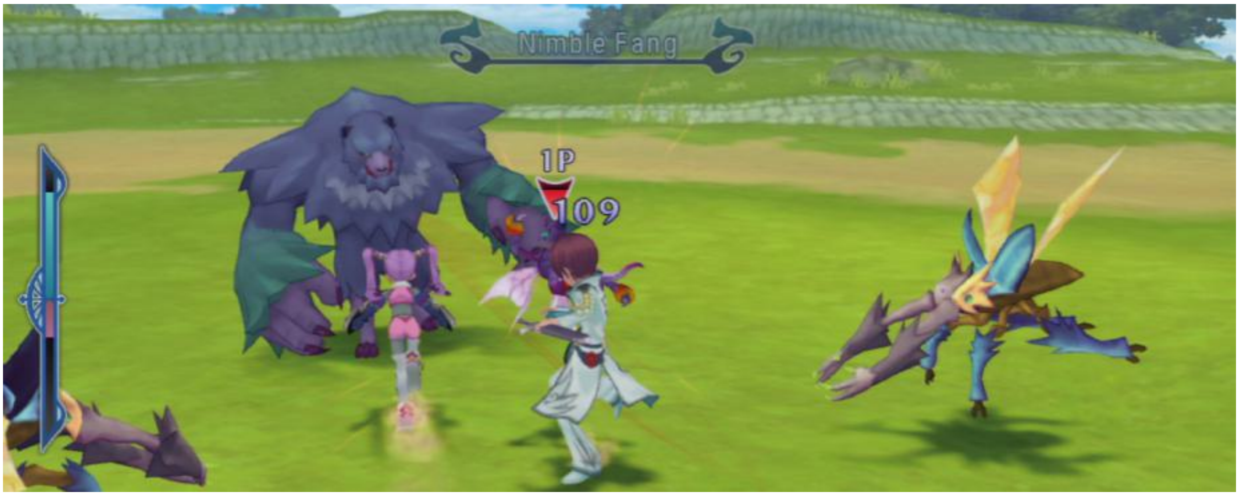
The world of *Tales of Vesperia* is fuelled by an energy source known as Blastia. The story begins when Yuri Lowell, former Imperial knight, investigates the disappearance of the Blastia core in his neighbourhood, putting him at odds with the kingdom's nobility. This eventually leads him and his compatriots to form a group called Brave Vesperia, dedicated to preventing acts of Blastia abuse around the world.

In many ways, this is a fairly typical *Tales* game, though it takes into account criticisms from *Tales of the Abyss* – the characters are less hostile to each other, it dials back the jargon, and the battle system is less needlessly complicated. The visuals aren't fantastic, but the brightly cel-shaded character models are a step up from the PS2 era, and they capture Kousuke Fujishima's character designs quite nicely. But the biggest strength is Yuri, probably one of the best protagonists in a series filled with interesting and likeable characters. Though he has a strong sense of justice, he's also frustrated at having to work against a flawed system filled with corruption. This often puts him at odds with his former buddy Flynn, still a member of the Imperial knights, thus sticking them on opposing sides of the law, despite their shared values. This sort of rogue do-gooder character is not uncommon in fiction, but it is strangely atypical of JRPGs, especially in a leading role, so Yuri's presence is refreshing.

The rest of the cast is fun as usual, including Estelle, the usual "sheltered princess" stereotype, though she's so sunny it's hard to dislike her; Judith, a flashy and flirtatious dragon rider and member of an elf-like race; and Rita, a smart but sharp-tongued researcher in the vein of Claus from *Tales of Phantasia*. There's also Repede, one of the few playable dogs in JRPGs, who has a pipe in his mouth and manages to have some great moments despite being unable to talk.

Tales of Vesperia has a strong reputation among series fans, and that's less because it does anything particularly well (aside from Yuri as the hero), but rather because it doesn't have any major flaws. There is some aimless pacing and the final act is not great, plus the world design is a bit dull, as is the soundtrack. However, these are also consistent issues with many other *Tales* games. But contrast this with other titles in the JRPG boom in the early days of the Xbox 360, which often suffered design, narrative, or technical problems: this game is largely free from those. Plus, it marks the first time Namco took the localisation for a *Tales* game seriously, by including the complete vocal song in the anime intro (with English lyrics sung by the original artist, Bonnie Pink) and fully voiced skits.

While initially an Xbox 360 exclusive, the later PS3 version added some extra elements, including two new characters – Patty, the oddball pirate girl, and Flynn, who should have been playable in the original version. Alas, despite many pleas, this was not localised until the 2019 *Definitive Edition*, released internationally for several platforms.



Tales of Graces

Developer: Namco | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): WII, PS3

Tales of Graces stars a group of friends led by a boy named Asbel, who discovers a mysterious purple-haired girl lying in a field of flowers. Who is she? She doesn't really know, and has trouble understanding basic human emotions, plus seems to be extraordinarily powerful. He decides to call her Sophie. At the same time, he befriends Richard, the prince of the kingdom, who has recently been the subject of some assassination attempts. During one of these, Asbel is seemingly fatally injured, only for Sophie to intervene and sacrifice herself to save him.

Fast-forward seven years and the friends have all grown up, including Asbel, who has become a royal knight. He seems to be harnessing some mysterious powers, and things get stranger when, during a moment of danger, Sophie mysteriously re-appears, again with no memory of what has happened. Political intrigue occurs, as people are still out to kill Richard, while the gang gets back together to fight back.

Tales of Graces' story is fairly average, but it's really let down by its cast of characters. Asbel is an incredibly generic hero, and a huge downgrade from Luke and Yuri in the previous two games. Sophie is a blank-faced robot, and every kid that they grew up with turns out to be either awful or uninteresting. Pascal, the quirky girl with weirdly multi-coloured hair, would be pretty obnoxious in any other game, but here her goofiness gives the crew some kind of personality.

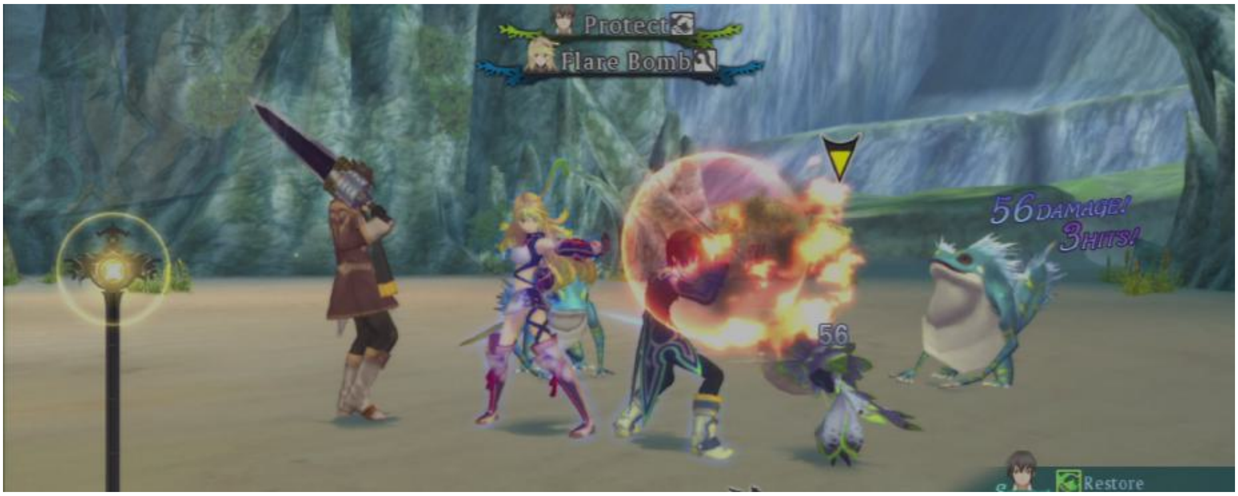
Instead, the strength of the game rests almost entirely on the battle system, which is one of the best the series has ever seen. The previous 3D entries stayed with the side-scrolling perspective just to maintain the feel of the older titles, but the camera here is instead placed above and behind the characters. It also ditches the TP system and replaces it with the CC system from some of the Japan-only PS2 games. Rather than having special moves that drain TP, you have a meter that indicates how long a combo you can perform. If you do well in combat, then the CC is extended, and you can pull off more moves. There are two types of attack, with different chains based on which direction you push the controls. Though the free-run has been weakened, there's a quick side-step move, as well as three different types of blocking manoeuvre. Everything just works together brilliantly, because it forces you to do more than just button-mash, and constantly rewards smart offensive and defensive planning. It also expands on the Title system of previous games by granting dozens of them to each character, and using them as a way of customising stats.

PS3
Tales of Graces f
namco

This entry began as a Wii game, which was incredibly buggy and never left Japan. The PS3 port was localised, though, as *Tales of Graces F*, which includes an extra "future" chapter as an epilogue. However, it's still a scaled-up Wii game, and looks markedly worse than *Tales of Vesperia*.

Ultimately the battle system really makes this game, and at least the storyline isn't as offensively bad as, say, *Star Ocean: The Last Hope*, so it's still quite enjoyable overall.

***Tales of Graces* has the reputation of having the best battle system but one of the worst stories.**



Tales of Xillia / Tales of Xillia 2

Developer: Namco | Released: 2011 | Platform(s): PS3

The "X" in *Tales of Xillia* stands for "crossover", owing to the dual protagonists within the game, as well as the collaboration of the two character artists of the series, Kousuke Fujishima and Mutsumi Inomata. As in *Star Ocean: The Second Story*, players can choose to view the game from the perspective of Jude, a medical student, or Milla, a mysterious woman who says she is a King of Spirits named Maxwell. Together they must work to destroy the Lance of Kresnik, a terrible super-weapon powered by a source called Spyrix.

There are a few changes with regard to the perspective – the viewpoint is moved behind the player, who can manipulate the camera, instead of the perspective shifting automatically. This works into how the areas are structured, as they're generally larger and more open. There's no real overworld anymore, just large areas filled with monsters. The battle system introduces a feature called Linking, whereby you can choose one of your fellow combatants as a partner, who will help beat up on enemies from behind as well as provide particular skills. There's also an Assault Counter similar to the Chain Capacity seen in some of the previous *Tales* games, influencing your combo length, though Artes still use TP.

Tales of Xillia is very much a typical *Tales* game, but it just feels like it's missing something. Milla has a cool design, but these strong, emotionless characters are a little too rote, and while Jude's role as a student makes him a little different from a typical RPG hero, he's also not really all that interesting. The story also suffers from the dual perspective: while Milla's more involved in the story, there are parts that only really make sense from Jude's perspective. Weirdly, the cooking system is also missing, and the music is fairly generic and repetitive, even considering the low standards of the series. Bits and pieces of the plot seem drawn from previous *Tales* games.

A direct sequel was released, taking place a year after the original, and featuring many of the same characters. The hero is Ludger Kresnik, who finds himself entangled with a mysterious girl named Elle. He's mostly a silent hero, but you can also make choices at specific points that influence his dialogue or actions, though the effect on the story is often minimal. At the outset, Ludger finds himself buried in medical debt, and must pay back money in increments in order to continue the story. Additionally, alternate dimensions have begun popping up, causing all sorts of instabilities in the main timelines. Ludger has the power to explore, and eventually destroy, these "what-if?" parallel worlds, which are interesting, since characters that were dead are now alive, or villains are actually good guys. But in the end, these dimensions need to be annihilated, forcing their lives back to the main timeline, so it can be pretty tragic. The fact that so much is recycled from the first game is tiring, and working off that debt feels like a cheap way to pad out the length, though the central conceit is more interesting than in a typical *Tales* game.

PS3
TALES OF XILLIA

***Tales of Xillia* is hardly the most interesting game in the series, and the fact that it got a sequel seems more about reusing assets than because the writers still had stories they wanted to tell.**

Tales of Zestiria

Developer: Namco | Released: 2015 | Platform(s): PS3, PS4, WIN

Tales of Zestiria focuses on a young man named Sorey, who lives in the sky among angelic beings called Seraphim. Curious about the world below, he regularly explores the ruins around the area, where he eventually happens upon a human girl named Alisha, princess of the kingdom of Hyland. Sorey and his pal Mikleo decide to leave their home and journey to the land of Glenwood down below, where they find people plagued by war and famine, whose negative emotions turn them into beasts called Hellions. Sorey, who, unlike normal humans, can see both Seraphim and Hellions, awakens a powerful sword and earns himself the title of the Shepherd, the fated saviour of the land.

The game is a cross-generational, released on the PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, and Windows internationally – as such, there's not much technical improvement over the previous *Xillia* games, though its lankier, more realistically proportioned characters take some getting used to. When you encounter enemies, battles occur there and then rather than on a separate screen, which leads to two primary issues – the frame rate is cut down to 30 FPS, making it feel much choppier than previous games, and the camera can often become a problem if you're caught in tight quarters. The battle system itself is roughly similar to that in *Tales of Graces*, with a camera that hovers behind the main character's shoulder. Characters are divided into humans and their Seraphim partners, the former strong in a mêlée, the latter at magic. Certain characters can perform Armatization transformations to fuse with their Seraphim. There's also a system to customise your characters' abilities by placing symbols in a grid, and arranging them in different formations can produce bonuses.

Tales of Zestiria is another fairly middling entry in the series, with nothing about it that really stands out, though most of its issues are no different from those in the other games in the series. But it does have a terrible reputation among series fans, which has more to do with what it represents in the grand scheme of the franchise. Post-*Vespiria*, Namco had begun to milk the series, producing titles that were average in quality, with budgets that were getting noticeably smaller, resulting in both technical deficiencies and stories that felt rushed. *Zestiria* just happened to be emblematic of these issues, and fans felt that the 20th anniversary of the series should have engendered more respect.

A minor controversy also arose around the game's characters in Japan, where the marketing indicated that the main heroine would be Alisha, the stoic princess knight, who seemed like an interesting character. However, when the game actually came out, Alisha was sidelined fairly early on in the story, with the heroine role being taken up by the merchant/assassin Rose, and Alisha's story was sold separately as DLC. Much of this was silly fandom drama, though the way that Alisha was shuffled off and Rose shoved in her place was thought bizarre enough that the anime adaptation rewrote their roles.

***Zestiria* has a poor reputation among series fans, mostly because it's emblematic of all that's wrong with the franchise up until this point.**

4 Hits!
273 Damage!
12 GUARD
10 GUARD
29 GUARD
91

Tales of Berseria

Developer: Namco | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PS3, PS4, WIN

Velvet and her little brother Laphicet live in relative peace in a rural village, protected by their older relative Artorius. However, when monsters invade the village, Artorius chucks Laphicet into a mysterious pit as a sacrifice; Velvet jumps in after him and emerges with a dark, mutated arm. After spending a few years in demon jail, she breaks out and finds the world under the religious, authoritarian rule of the Abbey, with Artorius as its leader. By banding together with a group of fellow misfits, she works towards her main goal: revenge. The title is inspired by the term "berserker".

Tales of Berseria plays to the series' biggest strengths, with its strong cast of characters, mostly anti-heroes whose goals aren't exactly noble, but are more than understandable. This focus on raw anger gives the story a strong sense of direction and purpose. Velvet struggles with her vanishing humanity, especially as she's joined by a boy who resembles her deceased brother so closely she renames him Laphicet. She's naturally a little dour compared to other *Tales* heroes, and her outfit is more revealing than those of most other female characters, especially considering the series never really felt exploitative in the same way as other anime-themed RPGs. But at least it is acknowledged in-game – her apparent failure to notice freezing temperatures, despite her skimpy outfit, is explained as being due to her loss of humanity, and you can change her default outfit if you prefer. The rest of the cast is strong, like Magilou, the selfish, eccentric sorceress, and Eleanor, a former Abbey exorcist who questions their cruel methods. Also, while evil religions are a pretty typical JRPG trope, at least here it's presented as such pretty much from the outset, rather than being held as a late game twist. Overall, the story is excellent, and runs counter to the series' reputation for generic plots.

No, this will not do! If you cannot command a dove, then ACT like one!

It does take place in the same universe as *Zestiria*, but 1000 years earlier, so while the storyline connections are technically thin, you can understand how the *Berseria* world evolved into that of *Zestiria*.

The battle system takes the character movement off its rails, allowing free movement around the battlefield. There are no "normal" attacks; instead each is a unique special move (an Arte in *Tales* lingo), which can be assigned to a button and customised into combos. Attacks are dictated by a Soul gauge, which regenerates on its own, but can be collected on the battlefield to lengthen combos or perform more powerful abilities called Break Souls. It's one of the better implementations of the *Tales* battle system, though it's not quite as fun as *Tales of Graces F*.

The only real downside is that the areas are large, empty, and barely detailed; they're even more downgraded than in *Zestiria*. Dungeon and field exploration feels pretty dull, and the somewhat overcomplicated loot system only offers little baubles for you to grab. But, after sputtering along for a number of years post-*Vesperia*, and flat-out floundering with *Zestiria*, *Berseria* is not merely a return to form for the *Tales* series, but one of its best entries.

PS4
Tales of Berseria

The tale of half-demon Velvet and her struggles against an authoritarian religious government proves to be more compelling than the stories in most *Tales* games.

Tales of (Portable Entries)

Developer: assorted companies | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): GBC, GBA, PSP, DS, 3DS, PSV

さあ、決戦だ!

NINTENDO DS
Tales of Hearts
namco

Many of the portable *Tales* games are dungeon crawlers with crossovers involving characters from the main games, or are simply unrelated genres. *Tales of Hearts* is an original game though, and is one of the better ones.

Every major RPG series got at least one portable spinoff, and the *Tales* games are no exception. The first such series was subtitled *Narikiri Dungeon*, released for the Game Boy Color. A storyline sequel to *Tales of Phantasia* that takes place about 100 years later, it stars a brother and sister named Dio and Mel, who must undergo a "spirit test" to uncover their past. Narikiri refers to the ability to change costume, transforming characters into different classes, including some based on other Namco characters. The dungeons are randomly generated, and battles use a turn-based Petit-LMBS system.

Tales of Phantasia: Narikiri Dungeon is very well regarded for its deep philosophical story, which goes into more depth about the world of *Phantasia*. It's pretty surprising, since most of these spinoffs have either throwaway or completely negligible stories, relying instead on the return of favourite characters. The game was later remade for the PSP as *Narikiri Dungeon X*, using the more standard *Tales* real-time battle system. While this does improve *X* compared to its predecessor, some of the darker elements of the original story have also been removed, taking much of the bite out of it.

This was followed up by *Tales of the World: Narikiri Dungeon 2*, for the Game Boy Advance. This was the first of a number of crossover games, this one featuring characters from *Phantasia*, *Destiny*, and *Eternia*. In it, the two heroes accept quests from townspeople and then explore a dungeon. The conventional action battle system returns as well, plus costumes can now be tweaked. The third *Narikiri Dungeon* game, also for the GBA, changes things up again, implementing a tactical map, where conflicts then play out in the traditional *Tales* fashion. *Tales of the World* spun out once again, producing *Summoner's Lineage*, another storyline sequel to *Phantasia*, also for the GBA. This is also a strategy game, though it's actually a sequel to an earlier Game Boy Color game called *Pocket King*, which in turn was an update of the Namco Famicom game *King of Kings*.

The next *Tales of the World* game was *Radiant Mythology* for the PSP. Like the second *Narikiri* game, its goals are to obtain quests and hunt down monsters, commanding a user-controlled character and allying with assorted *Tales* characters. It doesn't quite have the same costume system, but there are still a number of classes to pick from. The battle system is basically the same as in *Tales of the Abyss*. This is the only one of these spinoffs that was localised. It was followed up by two more sequels, also on the PSP, though released only in Japan, that expand the character classes and the cameos from other games.

Starting with the Nintendo DS, Namco began releasing new entries in the series that were closer to the mainline games, instead of being spinoffs with differing styles of gameplay. The first of these was *Tales of the Tempest* for the DS, co-developed by Dimps. The story focuses on two kids, Caius and Rubia, in a world in the middle of racial turmoil between humans and beastfolk called Leymon. In battle scenes, the field is divided into three lanes,

イリア
でも　異能者捕縛適応法で
前世の記憶がある人は　みんな
捕まっちゃう　可能性もあるでしょ

HP 318
HP 287

PS VITA
namco

Of the two remakes of DS *Tales* games, English speakers missed out on *Innocence R*, which isn't bad … but *Hearts R* is slightly better.

which your characters can hop between. Ultimately, though, the game has a slapped-together quality – the polygonal visuals are poor, the voice acting is sparse, and the quest is pretty short. It was so poorly received that it was downgraded from a "flagship" game to a "gaiden".

The next game, *Tales of Innocence*, was an improvement. It was outsourced to Alfa System, who had previously worked on some of the *Tales of the World* games. The protagonist is a boy named Luca, who's kind of a wimp, but has dreams of a powerful warrior named Asura. It turns out he's seeing visions of his previous life, as people all over the land begin to recall memories of a bygone war. It's a neat idea for a story, though the game is a bit too short to really pull it off.

The game is still 3D, but it's a huge improvement over *Tempest*, if obviously not on the level of the console games. The battle system is an amalgamation of other *Tales* systems, primarily that of *Tales of the Abyss*, along with the mid-air combos of the *Tales of Destiny* remake. Also included is the Guild system, which includes randomly-generated quests and dungeons, as in *Radiant Mythology*.

The game was ported to the Vita in 2012 as *Tales of Innocence R*, this being the first RPG for the system. It has improved graphics, closer to the level of the PS2 games (though it still looks a little sparse), some tweaks to the battle system, and much more voice acting. Some events have been altered, the guild missions are totally gone, and visible encounters have been replaced with random battles.

The next game, *Tales of Hearts*, was initially released for the DS in 2008. As the game begins, sister and brother Kohaku and Hisui are being chased by a mysterious woman. They elude capture, and happen upon a young man named Kor Meteor, who has the ability to enter people's Spiria, a representation of their emotions. While attempting to save Kohaku, he meets a mysterious sleeping beauty, and ends up shattering her Spiria, rendering her a half-awake husk, and begins a journey to not only rejuvenate her but also save the siblings from the woman who was chasing them.

In the initial DS release, *Tales of Hearts* primarily uses 2D graphics, making it look and play like 2D PS2 entries, such as *Tales of Destiny 2*. The Emotion Gauge (EG) replaces the CC system of the *Tales of Destiny* remake, but otherwise it's fairly similar. Though only three characters appear in battle at a time, as in the other DS games, other characters can be called upon to execute Connect Command attacks, including guest characters from other Namco games. The weapons, called Somas, can also be customised via raw materials found throughout.

Probably the weirdest aspect of this game is that there were two separate releases, completely identical except for their cutscenes. The *Anime* edition, obviously, uses the anime FMV typical of the rest of the *Tales* series, while the *CG* version uses really ugly computer-rendered versions of the movies.

The game was later remade for the Vita, under the name *Tales of Hearts R*, and it got a complete 3D overhaul, using the same engine as *Innocence R* (and only releasing an anime cutscenes version). The battle system resembles that of the other 3D entries, still using the old TP system. The Connect Commands are gone, but instead there's a Chase Link ability whereby you can knock enemies into the air and extend the combo by having your fellow party members join in. The DS game originally linked areas with a series of paths, but now there's a proper overworld, and the Soma upgrade system has changed. Many events have been deleted or changed, and while no one will miss the randomly-generated Spiria mazes, most of the other cuts are to the game's detriment. As with *Innocence R*, the random encounters are back as well. This is also one of the few portable *Tales* games localised into English, though the voice acting was left in Japanese.

Innocence and *Hearts* are surely a huge step up from *Tempest*, but ultimately, they're still just middle-of-the-road *Tales* games. As usual, the best things about them are the characters, like Hisui from *Hearts*, just because he's a hotheaded jerk who goes against the typical meek and kindly healer stereotype. *Hearts* is also the better of the two, if mostly because it feels more fleshed out.

While not officially part of the series, Namco did also produce a spinoff title as a tie-in with the *Sgt. Frog* series for the DS, titled *Keroro RPG: Kishi to Musha to Densetsu no Kaizoku* ("The Knight, the Samurai, and the Legendary Pirate"). Overseen by Tales Studio, it's very similar to *Tales of Hearts* for the DS, even including the trademark grading and cooking system. You control a group of frogs who have been sucked into a video game console and arrived inside of an RPG-style world, themed around samurai, pirates, and knights. It's filled with parodies of other games – heroes wear Gundam models as armour, and a character named Rain is patterned after Leon from *Destiny*. It's a little simple, since it was made for kids, but it's a decent title.

***Keroro RPG* is a secret *Tales* game, but also remained Japan-only, for licensing reasons.**

NINTENDO DS

VIDEOGAMES
STOP

Other Franchises

We started this book by looking at the ’80s JRPG scene, and then addressing the four most prolific franchises. But the JRPG landscape goes incredibly far beyond just these series, with hundreds upon hundreds of other games from various developers and publishers, big and small. This section explores many of these. As such, it’s also by far the largest chapter in this book.

It’s consequently broken up into several sub-chapters. To begin, we’ll look at *Star Ocean*, itself a step-sibling to Namco’s *Tales* series of the previous chapter. Next come other games by tri-Ace, which share some common design sensibilities. We then explore several other franchises that, while not quite as prolific as *Final Fantasy* or *Dragon Quest*, still made their mark on the genre, with their own devoted fanbases. Some are other RPG series by Square or Enix (who eventually merged in the early 2000s), but other developers and publishers represented include Capcom, SEGA, and Sony, as well as smaller publishers like Sting, Gust, Imageepoch, and Compile Heart. Their games include the *Chrono Trigger/Cross* duology, *Xenogears* and other games in the *Xeno* series, *EarthBound* (*Mother*), *Phantasy Star*, *SaGa*, *Breath of Fire*, *Wild Arms*, *Lunar*, *Shadow Hearts*, and many, many others. There are also sections on RPGs that were prolific in Japan but almost entirely unknown outside it, like Data East’s *Metal Max* and *Glory of Heracles* series, as well as Hudson’s *Tengai Makyou*.

After addressing franchises, we’ll be looking at some individual games. These are ordered roughly chronologically by era, beginning with 8-bit RPGs on the Famicom (as well as the Game Boy and Game Gear), then 16-bit games on the Genesis, Super Nintendo and TurboGrafx-16, moving onto the 32-bit generation with the PlayStation, Saturn, then the PlayStation 2 and Dreamcast, as well as assorted portable machines like the Game Boy and Nintendo DS. Finally we’ll move onto modern games on platforms like the PlayStation 4 and Nintendo Switch.

***EarthBound* (known in Japan as *Mother*) remains a beloved series, thanks to its charming sensibilities and goofy take on modern Americana.**

Star Ocean

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SFC, PSP, PS4, NSW

Wolf Team was a small, if prolific, developer throughout the ’80s and ’90s, creating titles like *El Viento* and *Sol-Feace*, but their big break came when they were drafted to make the SFC RPG *Tales of Phantasia* for Namco. But some of the staff seemingly disliked their new corporate overlord. Three of them broke off and formed tri-Ace, and quickly developed their own competing product, *Star Ocean*.

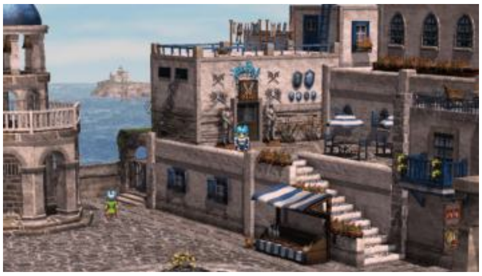
Star Ocean begins on the backwater planet of Roak, which has become ravaged with a mysterious disease. As the heroes, Roddick and Millie, fruitlessly search for a cure, they are contacted by two beings who teleport from outer space. Named Ronyx and Ilia, they belong to the Pangalactic Federation, and offer to help. However, the only solution is to transport themselves back in time to defeat the evil being Asmodeus, and thus obtain the cure. The plot is obviously based on *Star Trek*, particularly its fourth entry (the one with the whales), though despite the sci-fi premise, most of the story takes place in a medieval, magic-filled world, populated mostly by beast-human hybrids called Fellpool (a reference to the cat-like Felpurr from *Wizardry*), but also with winged beings called Featherfolk.

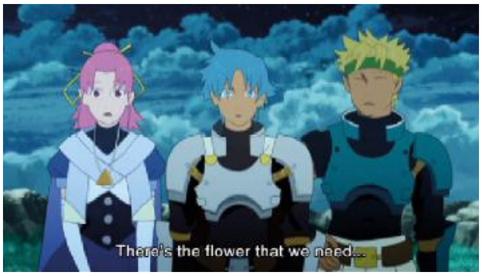
The game borrows a whole lot from *Tales of Phantasia*, including the time-travelling plot, the action-packed battle system, in which you directly control a single character alongside AI-controlled partners, and a soundtrack by Motoi Sakuraba. Rather than a vocal J-pop song, the intro is fully narrated in English, plus there’s plenty of digitised speech used as battle cries. It also uses a whopping 48 megabit ROM cartridge, in addition to a compression chip, to fit as much detail as possible into the game. The only thing it doesn’t have is a famed manga artist for the character designs.

The battle system here is a little undercooked compared to later games – you can’t directly move around the field, but instead you just target an enemy, then you’ll run up and attack them. It’s a bit daft, but it’s fun and frantic. But the real treat here is the skill system, which lets you individually power up a whole bunch of talents. Some of these are related to combat skills. However, certain skills, when levelled up together, will enable other abilities that have uses outside of the battlefield. Many of these are crafting skills, allowing you to create your own items, upgrade equipment, identify unknown items, create duplicates of common items, or cook more nourishing meals from raw ingredients. Others will let you decrease your character’s strength in exchange for more experience points, or raise or lower the frequency of random battles. You can also write books to teach skills to other characters, or play in a band, which can have a whole variety of effects depending on the instrument and kind of song. The amount of customisation and variety of skills is unprecedented among 16-bit console RPGs.

The story is also structured for replayability. Altogether, the game isn’t very long, clocking in

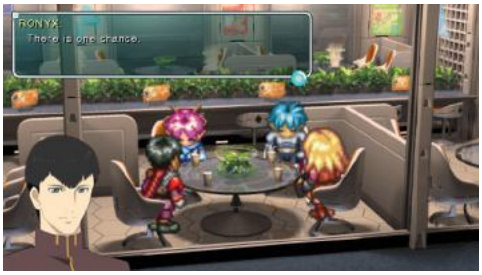
The opening cinematic sequence is voiced in English by none other than Robert Belgrade, actor who voiced Alucard in the original version of *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*.



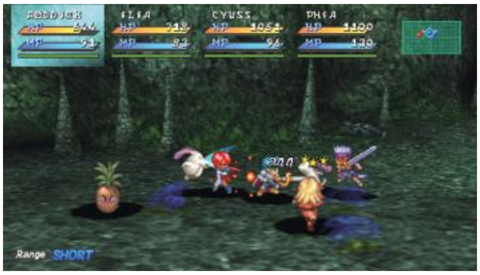


There's the flower that we need...

STAR OCEAN
First Departure



RONYX:
There is one chance.



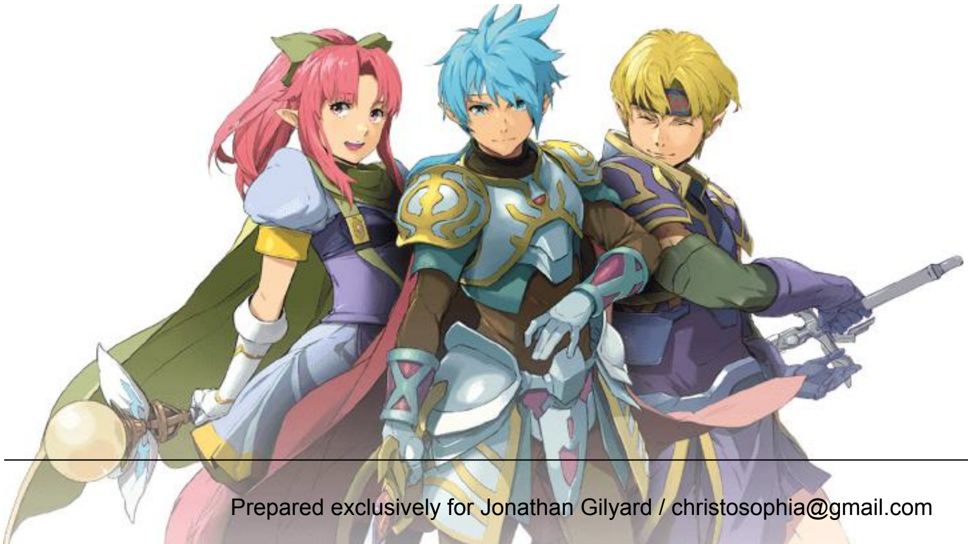
***First Departure* for the PSP is in many ways an improvement over the SFC original, though it loses many of the aspects that made the former such a technical marvel on the 16-bit platform.**

at less than 20 hours in length. There's no real overworld to speak of, just paths that connect major areas, and the areas feel a little small in spite of the exquisite detail they contain. But while the main story is fairly linear, there are many minor branches that determine which of the game's ten party members you can recruit. Since you can only have up to eight in your party, and you can't dismiss anyone that you've found, it's impossible to draft everyone by the end-game. Some of the requirements for the optional characters are also pretty obscure (good luck trying to figure out how to find the catgirl Pericci without using a guide). This intentional obscurity has since become a hallmark of tri-Ace games, for better or worse.

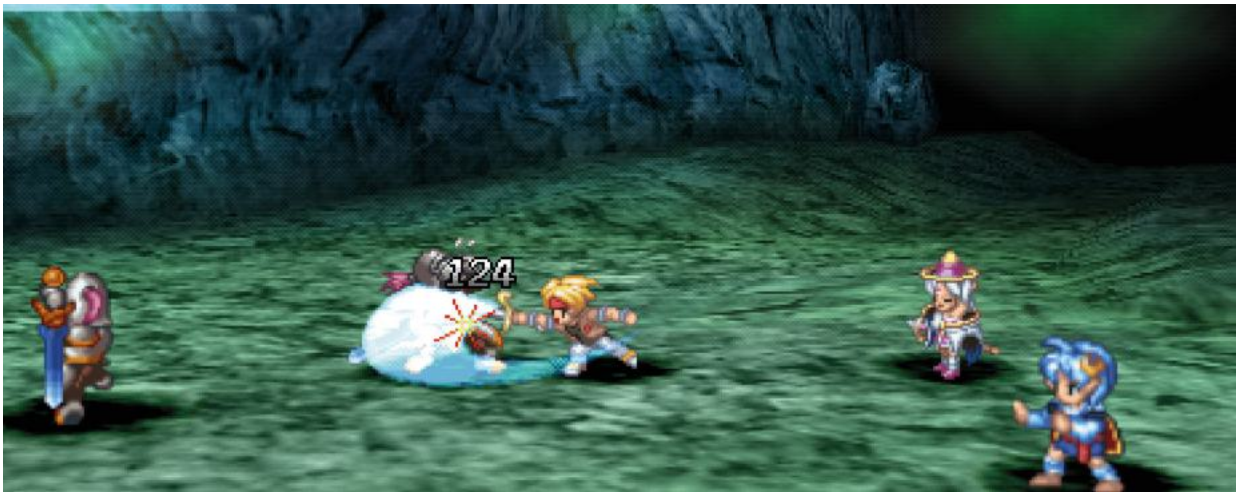
The SFC *Star Ocean* was not released outside of Japan, though its PSP remake, subtitled *First Departure* and published in 2007, reached English-speaking territories. The remake basically did the first game in the style of *Star Ocean: The Second Story*. Its field scenes are entirely 2D, using pre-rendered backgrounds, while the battle scenes are 3D, and feature much more control than in the original game. While it doesn't expand the story drastically, it does add in two more characters – one that appeared originally as an NPC, and the other a character from later games just shoved in here. It also adds a proper overworld map, plus plenty of voice acting and FMV cutscenes.

The battle system here is an unquestionable improvement, and while the skill system isn't drastically different, it is more refined. However, the "modernised" visuals are missing the utterly gorgeous spritework of the SFC game, and the rearranged music is somehow worse. As such, it feels like it's missing something.

This version was then ported to the PS4 and Switch in 2019, now subtitled *First Departure R*. It's mostly the same but changes the artwork to include character designs by Katsumi Enami, who also provided the artwork for *Star Ocean: The Last Hope*. The PSP version featured bright anime character portraits that are a little too close to those of the *Tales* games of the time, but the updated versions are much more distinctive, and also much better-looking. They also include a speed-up option and one to toggle between spoken languages.



The *Star Ocean* series has never had consistent art design, so the revamped characters for the 2019 port bring it more into line with *Star Ocean: The Last Hope*, the fourth game in the series.

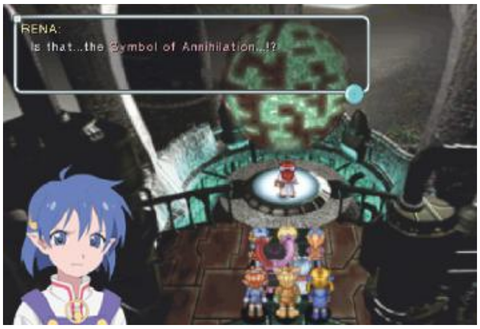


Star Ocean: The Second Story

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1, PSP, PS4, PSV, GBC

Star Ocean: The Second Story begins with Claude Kenny, son of Ronyx from the first game, being stranded on a backwater planet called Expel. His fancy technology leads the locals to believe that he's a prophesied hero, so he's teamed with a local girl named Rena to investigate a recent meteor crash. Their adventures eventually lead to them facing off against a shadowy cabal that threatens to destroy the planet.

This sequel expands significantly on the original, being a much longer, more elaborate game with stronger characters, while at the same time, having the breezy pacing lacking in many 32-bit RPGs. At the outset, you can choose either Claude or Rena as the protagonist, though other than the opening segment, which is viewed from their perspective, it only changes a few things in the course of the adventure. As with the first game, there are plenty of recruitable characters, many of whom are both optional and hidden. New to this entry are Private Actions that pop up when you enter towns, allowing you to explore the backstories of the various side characters. (Ashton, the cursed swordsman with two bickering dragons on his back, and Opera, the three-eyed gun-wielding soldier, are highlights.) Depending on your interactions, and a variety of other factors, there are tons of ending variations.



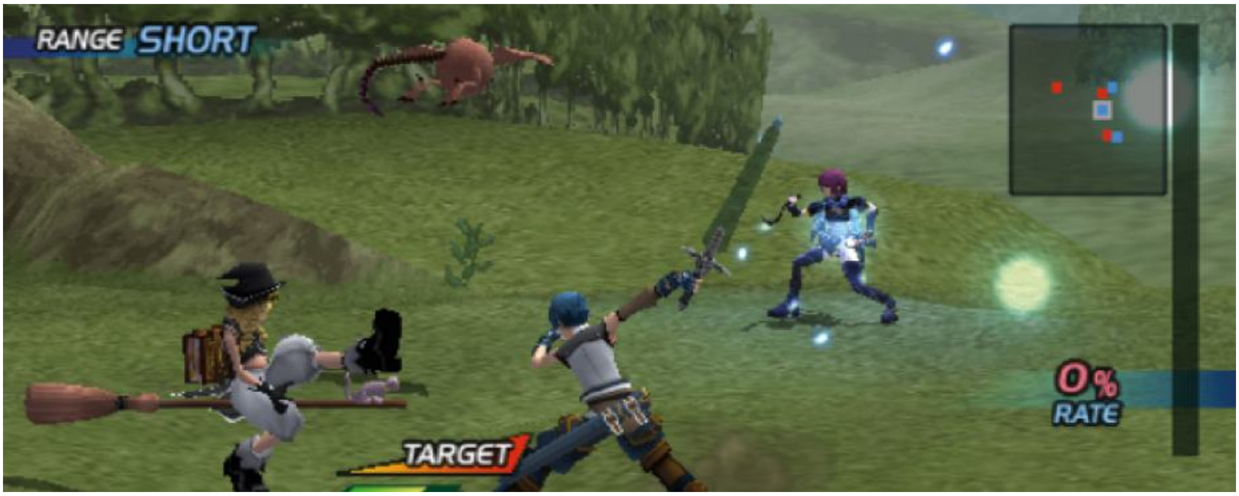
RENA:
Is that...the Symbol of Annihilation...!?

PlayStation
Star Ocean

In its PSP port, *Star Ocean: The Second Story* has fewer changes – more enhancements really – than were implemented for the first game's port, though the added character portraits, as seen here, aren't the greatest.

The game uses 2D sprites for the main characters and pre-rendered backgrounds for most areas, though the battlefields and overworld are 3D. You have more freedom of movement in this game compared to its predecessor, though it still feels a little clumsy. The skill system has been expanded even more though, allowing you to do ridiculous things like create "illegal" items that, for example, let you stay at any inn for free, or get insurance so you get some cash if one of your characters is KOed in battle. You can also summon a gigantic bunny that lets you travel quickly on the overworld, similar to a *Final Fantasy* Chocobo. If you know what you're doing, you can totally break the game balance, though conversely, there are some frustrating difficulty spikes unless you know how to find the right items. (Make use of that pickpocketing skill!) This is a recurring theme in tri-Ace games, but otherwise, *Star Ocean: The Second Story* is the highlight of the series, with a well-paced plot, likeable characters, and a fantastic soundtrack by Motoi Sakuraba.

This game was the Western world's introduction to the world of *Star Ocean*, since the original Super Famicom game was not localised. The translation is average, though, and the voice clips are laughably bad. A PSP port released in 2008 isn't as drastic a remake as its predecessor's PSP release, but does retranslate the text and employ professional voice acting. This entry also received a Japan-only sequel for the Game Boy Color called *Star Ocean: Blue Sphere*. It takes place two years later and stars the same characters. It's obviously much downgraded for the 8-bit portable system, but otherwise is fairly well done.



Star Ocean: Till the End of Time

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): PS2

Fayt
"Don't think everything will go your way!
We're not your toys!!!"

PlayStation 2
STAR OCEAN
Till the End of Time
SQUARE ENIX

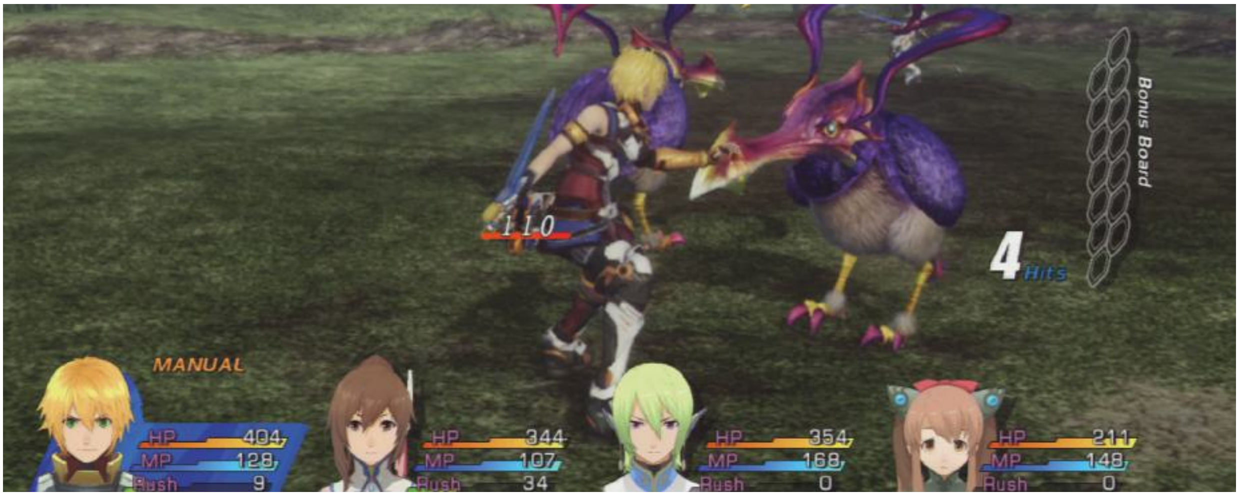
Fayt Leingod began a trend for goofy JRPG hero names, including Edge Maverick (*Star Ocean: The Last Hope*), Kor Meteor (*Tales of Hearts R*), and L'arc Bright Lagoon (*Arc Rise Fantasia*).

The third *Star Ocean* begins with the improbably named teenage hero Fayt Leingod hanging out at a resort with his parents and his childhood friend Sophia. Alas, their vacation is interrupted when they're attacked by mysterious forces, and during the ensuing evacuation, Fayt gets separated, ending up on the planet of Vanguard III. As he tries to reunite with his family, he finds himself at the centre of a conflict between a various interstellar factions. This is fundamentally the same "character from advanced world ends up on technologically underdeveloped planet" plot as prior games, but Fayt's origin as a regular Earthling teenager, as opposed to either a member of the Federation or an inhabitant of that planet, gives it a different feel.

The graphics are now fully 3D, with tri-Ace embracing its cinematic side, for better or worse. For the most part, it looks pretty decent, though some of the character models have proportions that make them look more creepy than anything else. The music is no longer sequenced though, allowing Motoi Sakuraba to go hog wild with a crazy prog rock soundtrack. Bonuses are given out if you completely map out each area, though this is more exasperating than anything else.

The battle system is faster and more chaotic than before, with two types of attack (weak and heavy) as well as a block command. Every combatant, friend or foe, also has a Fury meter, which dictates how often they can attack, which both discourages button mashing and indicates when foes are about to attack. There's also a Bonus Gauge, which will provide extra experience if you can beat your foes quickly. More unusually, MP here works as a second life meter: draining it will cause a character to be knocked out. Many enemies have attacks that will drain MP too, so you need to be extremely careful with your special attack usage. The skill system has been dialled back, though, as you can only upgrade stats, while battle skills are improved by repeated use. In its place is a crafting system by which you can "invent" items. This is governed by a girl named Welch Vineyard, who became a sort of recurring mascot for the series, even being plopped into the PSP ports of the first two games as a playable character.

For the most part, *Star Ocean: Till the End of Time* is a solid game, but it's impossible to really discuss it without bringing up its controversial, rather meta, plot twist, in which the characters realise that the world isn't what it seems to be. The problem is that this has repercussions for the previous two games. It is actually a pretty cool science-fiction philosophical conceit, but sticking it into the middle of a well-liked franchise may not have been the best idea. It angered many series fans, and effectively caused a problem for all subsequent *Star Ocean* games, which dance around it by being prequels. Gamers who take video game's canon seriously will be annoyed by this, but if you know about and accept the twist going into it, you'll probably enjoy it a lot more.

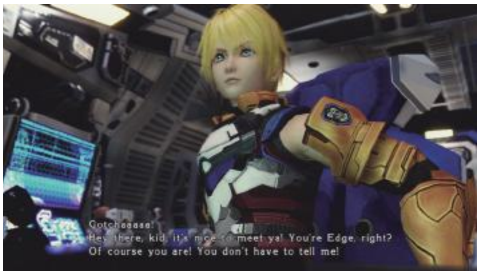


Star Ocean: The Last Hope

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): X360, PS3, PS4, WIN

Star Ocean: The Last Hope is a prequel, setting itself aside from the messiness inherent in the previous game's ending. Earth has been consumed by war, so people look to the stars to find a new planet to inhabit. The hero here is Edge Maverick, alongside his childhood friend/love interest Reimi. There's quite a few references to various bits of *Star Ocean* lore, particularly from the first game, as you visit the planet of Roak, and characters from races like the Lesser Fellpool (cat people) and Featherfolk (winged people) join your party. Additionally, while previous games involve only a few planets, here you get command of a whole starship, allowing you to trek off to many different worlds, which adds to the space-opera feel. The story never gets quite as wild as *Till the End of Time*, although there is a diversion that sends the crew time-travelling back to Earth, specifically Roswell, New Mexico in the '50s.

The battle system ditches many of the changes from the third game – no MP death, only one attack strength, and four players in combat. However, there's a dodge button now, along with a Blindside manoeuvre, which will put you in position to counterattack if you hit it at the right time. There's a new "Rush" gauge, which will activate a powered state when it's filled up, plus an enhanced combo system and the ability to customise your fighting style. Skill enhancement is also more like that in the older games, in which you distribute points into different skills, though there are far fewer than before, plus many characters have exclusive abilities. The environments are large – too large, actually, with not enough save points – but they were probably designed that way to expand the exploration aspect.

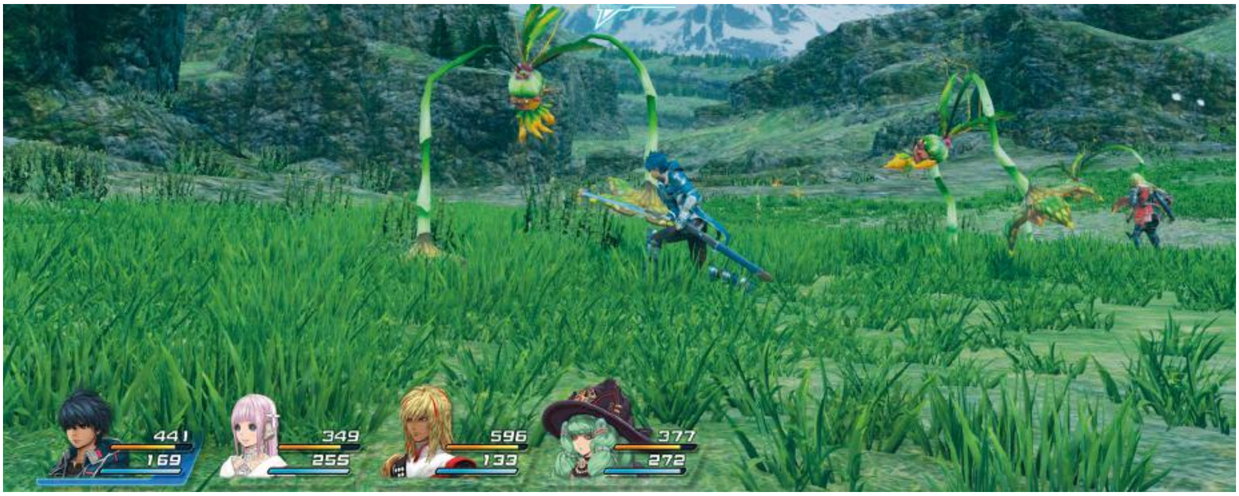

Gotchaaaaa!
Hey there, kid, it's nice to meet ya! You're Edge, right?
Of course you are! You don't have to tell me!

Now, many games in the early 2000s had issues with cutscene direction, owing to technical limitations, low budget, and developer inexperience. But those here are uniquely terrible, for a number of reasons: creepy, doll-like character models, awkward animation, terrible dialogue, and even worse voice acting. Some of the characters here are insufferable just because they're either annoying, like the air-headed Featherfolk Sarah, or incredibly creepy, diminutive Lyle, who sounds like a five year old who's spent her entire short existence strung out on sedatives. The result is some of the most unintentionally hilarious cutscenes in this generation of gaming. Which is great if you enjoy deliberately consuming such excruciating stuff, but not so great if you actually want to play and enjoy a JRPG. To the game's credit, you can skip cutscenes, after which you're granted a short summary of what happened. This is probably the best way to play the game, because, while the story is cringeworthy, the battle system is one of the best of the series. Unfortunately, after the divisive third game, most fans felt that this entry is where the *Star Ocean* series jumped the shark.

In a weird bit of localisation, in the original Xbox 360 release, the English version uses CGI character portraits while the Japanese version has anime-style portraits. Subsequent versions let you pick which type you'd prefer.

PS3
STAR OCEAN
THE LAST HOPE
INTERNATIONAL
SQUARE ENIX
T

The cutscenes in *Star Ocean: The Last Hope* are embarrassingly bad – look up the "Nappy Time" scene for a very particular kind of horror – but the battle system is as fun as ever.



Star Ocean: Integrity and Faithlessness

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PS4

The fifth *Star Ocean* game takes place on the under-developed planet of Faykreed, and is a prequel that takes place between the second and third games. The hero, Fidel Camuze, and the heroine, Miki Sauvester, are caught in an emerging war, which descends further into chaos when a spaceship crashes from the sky, holding a young girl named Relia, who has the mysterious power to freeze time.

Integrity and Faithlessness feels a lot like tri-Ace's Xbox 360 RPG *Infinite Undiscovery*, primarily since battles now take place directly where you encounter them on the field, rather than switching to a separate screen. Also, there are very few cutscenes, and instead dialogue is delivered with the characters standing around. On one hand, considering the terrible cutscene direction of *The Last Hope*, this might be for the best, but on the other hand, it does make things feel cheap.

That budget feeling permeates the whole game. The environments are pretty, but they're so large and there are so few of them. Considering how you could jump between planets in *The Last Hope*, and at least hopped between a couple of worlds in the earlier games, being constrained to one planet feels claustrophobic. Plus there's noticeable asset reuse, including recycling music tracks directly from the two previous games. Finally, it feels like much of the game is simply spent running back and forth between destinations.

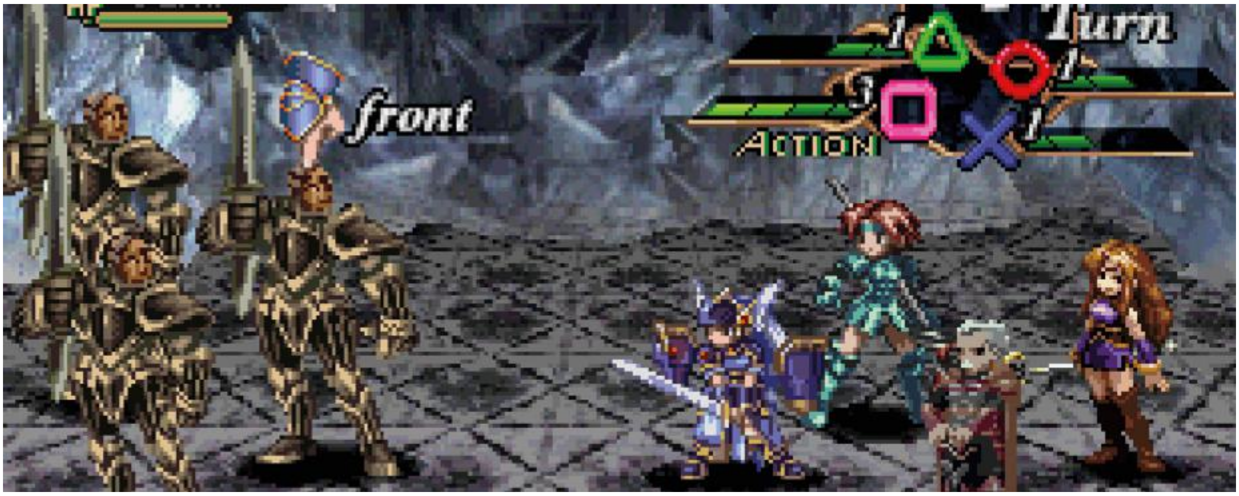
The character designs were provided by Akira "Akiman" Yasuda, a noted artist for Capcom, who worked on its many fighting games. The character models are much better than in past games, though the design for Fiore Brunelli, a green-haired witch with a fishnet checkerboard outfit that barely covers her figure, ranks as one of the most ridiculous in any JRPG.

You can have up to seven playable members in your party at the same time, and not only do they run beside you on the field, they also all fight simultaneously during combat. Other than in its large number of characters, the battle system is closer to the third game's, in which you have two levels of attack, though it doesn't have any of the oddities, such as MP death. Special attacks are executed by holding down the attack button, which is a little awkward. While you can block and sidestep, it still feels like a big step back from *The Last Hope*. It's still fun, in the same way that *Star Ocean* generally is, but some difficulty spikes make things frustrating too. Attributes are modified by equipping and levelling up roles, which also doesn't feel as gratifying as some of the previous games in the series.

The story is just okay, with predictable beats and bland characters, plus it is rather short compared to other JRPGs. While it's nice to have a game you can complete in about 25 hours, it feels too insubstantial to be truly satisfying. And while it doesn't have anything as dramatically divisive as the third game's egregious plot twist or the fourth game's grating sense of humour, *Star Ocean: Integrity and Faithlessness* commits an arguably greater sin – it's just kinda boring.

PS4
STAR OCEAN

The most recent *Star Ocean* game feels like it was built on the back of *Infinite Undiscovery*, an earlier Xbox 360 RPG that also featured wide open areas and tons of AI-controlled characters.



Valkyrie Profile

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1, PSP, IOS, AND

Ragnarok, in Norse mythology, is a world-ending clash of the gods, which will lead to a rebirth of the world. In tri-Ace's *Valkyrie Profile*, you control a warrior goddess, the Valkyrie Lenneth, as she scours the land in humanity's final days to recruit souls for the apocalyptic battle. She can fly anywhere, listening out for the cries of potential soldiers in their death throes. Those whose deaths she witnesses are added to the ranks of her Einherjar, although they may still be unprepared to reach their true potential. Their training is accomplished through their joint exploration of the many caves and ruins of Earth, before you send them to the afterlife in Valhalla.

Post-apocalyptic games are common, but pre-apocalypse settings, that is, worlds on the verge of inevitable collapse, are fairly rare, but that's where *Valkyrie Profile* finds itself. The story has an episodic feel, as each segment concentrates on a specific character (or characters) as they meet untimely and tragic ends, but there's a running story involving Lenneth's own human life before she joined the ranks of the Valkyries. It's dark and oppressive, but consistently compelling.

The dungeons are presented as 2D side-scrolling labyrinths, complete with platforming challenges. Enemies can be frozen and pushed around or used as steps, but of course they can also be engaged in combat. Here, each of the four warriors in your party is assigned to one of the four controller buttons, and has their own attack pattern. It's a test of timing and reflexes, as you combine your warriors' attacks to juggle the enemy and fill a power bar; if you're successful, you can then execute a super-powerful move to crush them. It's incredibly satisfying, though it does get old after a while, especially since you can't skip those flashy super attacks.

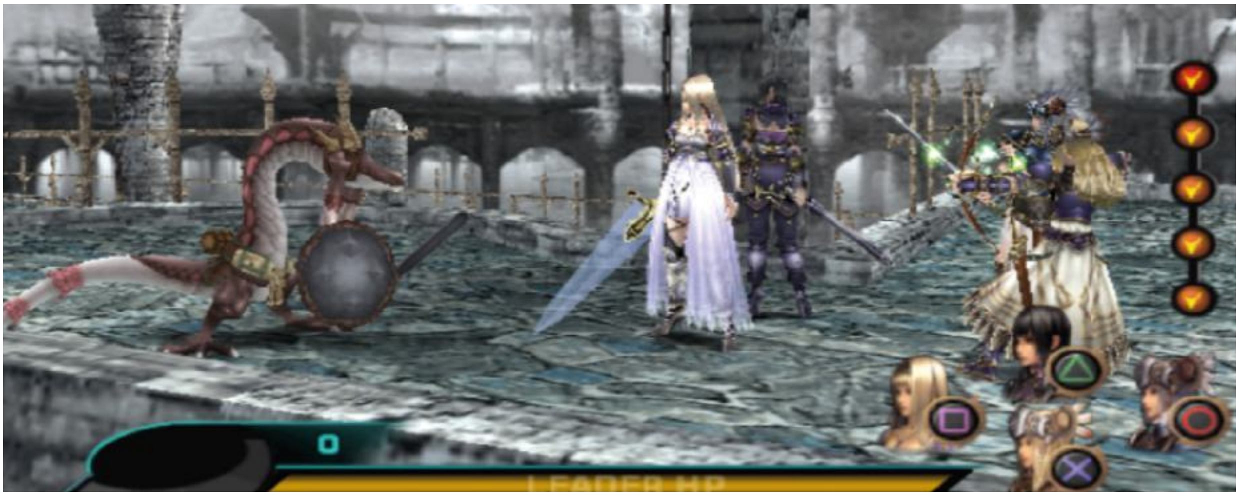
Valkyrie
「This is. . .
The human world. . . ?

However, even early in their life, tri-Ace was known for making somewhat opaque games with numerous hidden elements, and *Valkyrie Profile* is probably the worst of them. The game is divided into chapters, and there are only so many actions you can take – visiting towns, hunting souls, clearing dungeons – before it ends. Then you need to select which warriors to send to the heavens. It's all rather vague and stressful, since you're never entirely clear if you're meeting your goals or making adequate trade-offs – after all, once you send a character off, they're gone forever.

There are multiple endings and it's pretty difficult to get to the good one; moreover, while there are two difficulty modes, the hard mode is arguably easier, since you have more characters and more powerful moves. This is a game where you almost definitely want to play with a strategy guide, lest you find yourself making an unfortunate mistake and needing to replay the game to see the proper ending. Altogether, it can be frustrating, but the flashy battle system, oppressive atmosphere, and a soundtrack from Motoi Sakuraba – who composed unique themes for every dungeon – turn it into an enduring classic.

PlayStation
VALKYRIE PROFILE

In most RPGs, it's your job to stop the end of the world. In *Valkyrie Profile*, it's your job to start it.



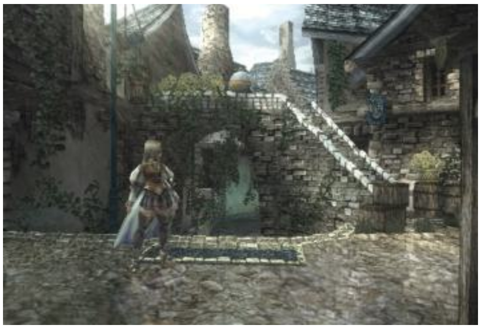
Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PS2

The follow-up to *Valkyrie Profile* is actually a prequel, taking place several hundred years before Ragnarok. It focuses on Silmeria, one of the other Valkyrie sisters, whose soul inhabits the body of a girl named Alicia, the princess of Dipan. Thought to be possessed, Alicia is not only ordered executed but also hunted by Hrist, the third Valkyrie sister, at the order of the almighty Odin. As Alicia/Silmeria escape, they must prevent events that would send gods and humanity into devastating conflict.

tri-Ace must have realised that the first *Valkyrie Profile* was maybe a little too opaque. But rather than fine-tuning it, they threw away much of what made it so original. Progression here is much more typical and structured – go from one area to the next, with no time limit – as the idea of training souls and delivering them to afterlife falls by the wayside. There are still Einherjar to recruit, but they're already dead by the time you meet them, and barely have any personality or backstory, so they feel more like bonus items. Instead of the episodic minitragedies of its predecessor, it concentrates on Alicia/Silmeria and the rest of a smaller core cast. Storytelling was rarely a strength of tri-Ace, and here, it feels like something's missing, especially without the sense of world-ending dread of the first game. The stories don't seem to connect at the outset, though the game does feature a few familiar faces.

The visuals are entirely polygonal this time, and are at the apex of the PlayStation 2's display capabilities, although exploration is still presented as side-scrolling 2.5D. The lighting, the character models, the physics, the beautiful renditions of the towns and dungeons – all of it is remarkable and runs at a smooth 60 FPS. The dungeons themselves play similarly to those in the first game, though you can switch places with frozen enemies now too.



PlayStation.2
VALKYRIE PROFILE 2
SILMERIA
SQUARE ENIX

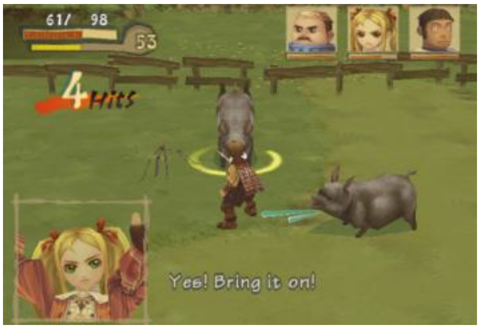
The battle system has seen a significant overhaul, one that makes it feel far less static. Combat takes place in a separate 3D arena, where you can move around freely, limited by your action points. However, time only flows when you move, so you're free to strategise. Both your party's and the enemy's targetting ranges are visible, so you must try to get close to them while avoiding their line of sight. Once you've found a foe to attack, the view switches to the side-view action-based system used in the first game, with four character actions assigned to the four buttons. The extra tactical options that come with outmanoeuvring your enemies make it much more interesting, plus you can hack off the body parts of many monsters to make them vulnerable. The number of arenas is limited and battles can still get a little old, but you can resolve encounters quickly by hunting down the enemy leader.

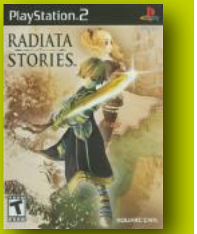
Valkyrie Profile 2's straightforward structure is unlikely to frustrate players in the same way as its predecessor's format. But by changing and removing so much of what it made the first game special, this sequel's impact is lessened, and its snazzy visuals and fun battle system alone are left to carry it.

The mini-stories focusing on the departed warriors were the best part of the original *Valkyrie Profile*, and their absence is definitely felt in this sequel.

Radiata Stories

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): PS2





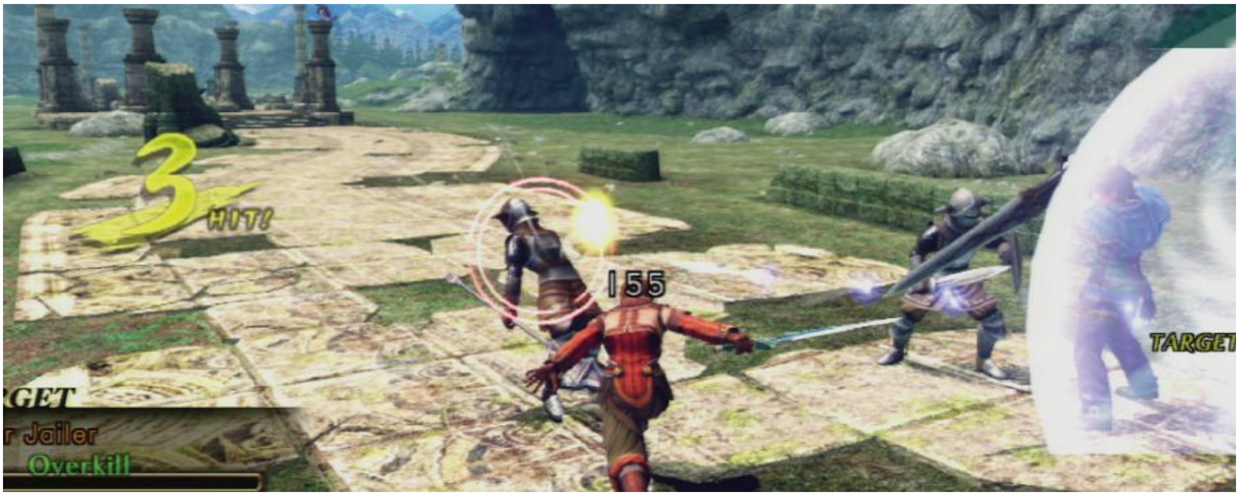
Yes, hero Jack Russell may be named after a dog breed, but at least his name's not as ridiculous as Edge Maverick.

In 2005, Square Enix and *Star Ocean* developer tri-Ace released *Radiata Stories* on the PlayStation 2, one of the most underrated games in both companies' libraries. You play as Jack Russell, a knight-in-training who ends up getting fired and joining a warriors' guild after fellow trainee and noble Ridley ends up hurt on a mission. As you start living an average life in the country of Radiata and exploring its capital city, leaving to do quests in the countryside, a larger story is building, in which the fairy folk and other non-humans are facing the coming of a great magical disaster, and a war with the humans. Ridley becomes central to this, and your major choice in the game is to either follow Ridley or stay within human society; your choice radically changes what happens in the second half of the game's story.

Functionally, it's like a different take on the *Suikoden* 108-stars-of-destiny concept, as you can gather up to 176 different characters as possible party members. It's a varied roster, filled with many races and classes too, though that plot-branching decision you have to make mid-game can lock several out of your grasp. The game runs on an in-game day/night cycle following a specified calendar, with major story events occurring based on the calendar, and not your progress. Every NPC also has their own daily schedule, which was something rarely seen in this era. The downside to this is that trying to recruit these NPCs is incredibly difficult unless you've got a strategy guide handy.

Radiata Stories has an impressive amount of detail in its world and history, with characters having well-established and complex relationships. It's a very rich experience that rewards replay, and has staying power due to a strong mechanical base. There's a huge mess of side quests to find and do, while combat tries adding a tactical edge to the real time arena fights of *Star Ocean*. Your party is AI-controlled, but you can give them commands and use a formation system for offensive and defensive strategies, absolutely necessary in several major story fights, because your enemy will do the same, with destructive results. This keeps battles lively and a tad unpredictable, plus it's rewarding to get through by means of your ability to think on your feet. In practice, though, it lacks the "oomph" that makes the *Star Ocean* fights so fun.

The visuals have a very muted look, though the colourful and varied character designs are charming; it's a tremendous step up from *Star Ocean: Till the End of Time*. It's a fairly humorous game overall, especially in the way you can kick almost anything (and initiate combat with those thus irritated). Noriyuki Iwadare's score also remixes several Motoi Sakuraba tracks from past tri-Ace games, many of which have already been reused in multiple *Star Ocean* games as well as *Valkyrie Profile*. There are other shout-outs to these past works, including special armour and extra bosses you can search out. These are probably the oddest parts of the game, because *Radiata Stories* otherwise feels so different from their past works.



Infinite Undiscovery

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): X360

XBOX 360
LIVE
INFINITE UNDISCOVERY
SQUARE ENIX

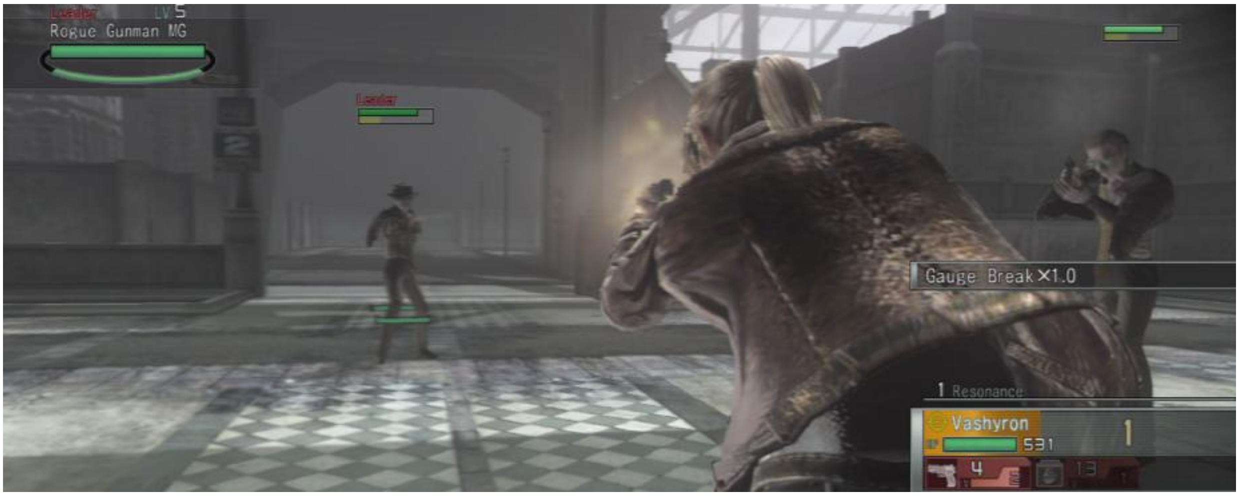
In the world of *Infinite Undiscovery*, the Dreadknight Leonid has chained the moon to the Earth, causing devastation in every region where those chains lie. Only the hero Sigmund has the strength and resolve to take him down … except you don't play as Sigmund, you control a layabout named Capell, who just happens to look almost exactly like him. Due to a case of mistaken identity, Capell is broken out of prison, and reluctantly joins the Resistance.

Like *Star Ocean*, *Infinite Undiscovery* is action-based, though there are no battle transitions and all fights take place on the field. It's not quite as snappy nor as satisfying as the *Star Ocean* games, but it's fun enough. Though you can have four members in your main party, many sections let you create two extra parties that roam around the area and fight of their own accord. The main draw of the game is seeing a dozen fellow combatants fight and slay foes alongside you, though this also causes the frame rate to suffer significantly. There are also many scenarios with specific goals, like hunting down crystals in a town or escorting migrants through a desert. Though these grant bonuses if completed under the right conditions, they're often frustratingly designed.

Much of the game suffers from this lack of polish, to the point where it feels incomplete. You can only directly control Capell, and while you can Connect with other party members to use their attacks or talk to them, actually doing this is incredibly clumsy, particularly in battle. There are 18 playable characters in total, and while some of them are pretty cool (the rideable bear in particular), the story just doesn't focus much time to make them interesting. Capell is a flautist, and his playing produces various effects, such as buffing party members or disabling enemy magic, but it's only barely useful. The visual style is fairly bland, outside of some cool architecture, plus many areas are filled with invisible walls. The story is also relatively short for a JRPG, clocking in at between 20 and 30 hours. The cutscene animation is generally pretty bad, and some scenes just don't have voices, for some reason. Motoi Sakuraba's orchestral score keeps things interesting, thankfully.

Plus, Capell makes for an unusual doofus hero. Nowadays, the game is mostly remembered for an embarrassing cutscene in which the twin children Rico and Rucha – terrifying, doll-like monstrosities in their own right – do a ridiculous "dinner dance", and Capell copies their absurd little frolic. It's emblematic of the game's questionable animation, though even in context, the scene is supposed to be funny. He also openly lusts after every female party member and attempts (and fails) to ditch the party multiple times. Goofy bits like this, as well as occasional glimpses into the game *Infinite Undiscovery* wants to be, give some charm to what's otherwise a fairly middling experience. It's the only non-Microsoft Xbox 360 title to receive no ports to other platforms, which shows the level of enthusiasm the audience has for *Infinite Undiscovery*.

***Infinite Undisovery* feels like tri-Ace was still learning the ropes on the new console, resulting in an experience that feels somewhat incomplete.**



Resonance of Fate

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): PS3, X360, PS4, WIN

In tri-Ace's *Resonance of Fate* (*End of Eternity* in Japan), the Earth has been ravaged, and humanity has moved to a gigantic tower called Basel. Its citizens are stratified, literally and figuratively, across various levels, which are ruled by elite Cardinals. A trio of mercenaries – young man Zephyr, grizzled soldier Vashyron, and ambitious newbie Leanne – find themselves opposing these Cardinals over the fate of Basel. It's a fascinating steampunk-style game world – any townscape is worth admiring just for the sprawling buildings and many interconnected gears, though the dungeons, where most of the action takes place, are fairly boring in comparison.

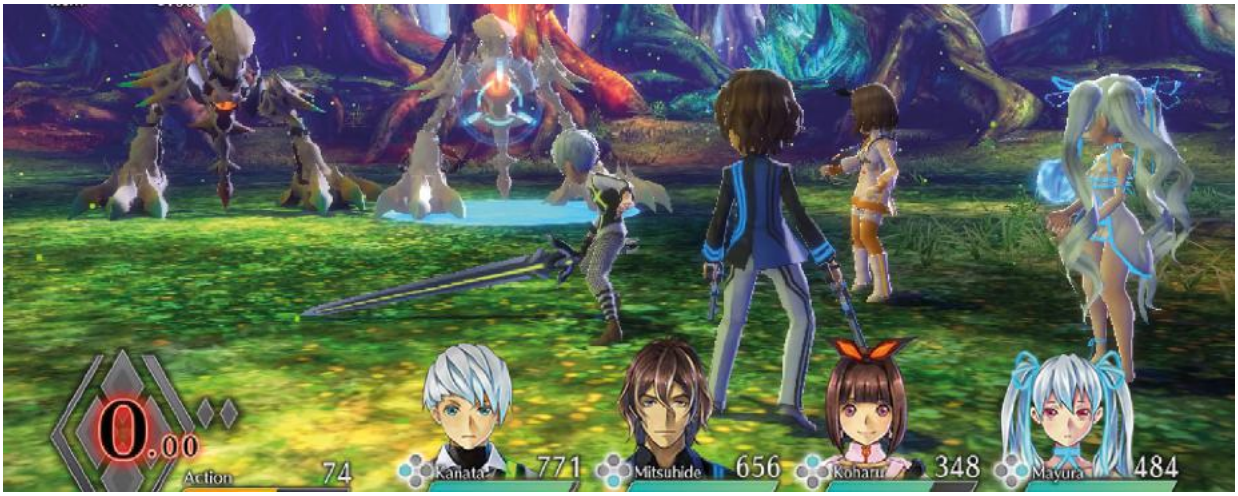
To access missions, you need to unlock squares on the map screen, which are either doled out as part of the main story or found by killing foes. The real meat of the game lies in the gun-focused combat system, which does its best to recreate a John Woo-style bullet ballet in the context of a Japanese RPG. It's a blend of real-time and turn-based action, in which you move characters individually around the battlefield, finding cover and targetting enemies. Choosing weapons is important, as machine guns do only Scratch damage, which is temporary and can slowly be healed, while pistols and grenades do Direct damage, which will register Scratch damage as permanent in addition to inflicting its own.

You need to charge up, the time needed for this depending on various factors, before you can actually attack, though sometimes you can do this multiple times in a turn. You can also command a party member to run in a straight line (called a Hero action), allowing them to dodge enemies attacks and unleash a number of super-flashy acrobatic moves as long as they're moving. This will consume one of your party's Bezel gems, although these can be replenished by killing enemies, or be picked up on the field. Keeping your Bezels stocked is of the utmost importance, because if you run out, you can't do run-and-gun manoeuvres, and your party members' defences will drop. If you plan correctly, you can also use all three characters to perform a powerful Tri-Attack. The battle system has a steep learning curve, but overcome that hurdle, and it's a fascinating blend of action and strategy seen in few other games. The many rocking battle themes by tri-Ace regular Motoi Sakuraba are fantastic too, plus there are variations for the more intense action, while Kohei Tanaka, typically known for anime soundtracks, provides some stellar works outside of the fights.

Like many tri-Ace games with flashy battle systems, it does tend to get repetitive in the long run, especially for weaker encounters. This could have been be salvaged by a decent story, but in spite of the cool game world, it's just a hugely confusing mess. It does have an offbeat sense of humour, though, particularly evident in the goofy costumes you can use to dress up the characters. Together with the unique combat, these elements bestowed cult classic status on *Resonance of Fate*, along with enough goodwill for a 2018 HD remaster.

PS3
RESONANCE OF FATE
SEGA

***Resonance of Fate* ranks right up there in terms of battle system complexity in JRPGs, but it sure looks cool.**



Exist Archive

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 2015 | Platform(s): PS4, PSV

Developed as a collaboration between tri-Ace and Spike Chunsoft, *Exist Archive* begins with a typical Japanese isekai (alternate world) premise – 12 teenagers are killed in the real world, and sent to some fantasy realm. They're not quite dead though, as they've actually been whisked away to a faraway planet called Protolexa. Each of them has been made to carry a part of the soul of a demon named Yamatoga, and only by assembling together and resurrecting him do they have a chance to return to their former lives on Earth.

Exist Archive was clearly designed for the Vita first and then ported to the PlayStation 4, as the graphics aren't exactly HD quality. The art design is well done though, complete with lush, colourful forests and caves. The characters were created by Mino Tarou, who was also behind the *Love Plus* series, though as usual for JRPGs, the characters look more like fashion models than actual teenagers, and the slightly super-deformed character models are a little off-putting. tri-Ace regular Motoi Sakuraba provides the music, in another excellent, albeit typical, work.

The game is fundamentally a spiritual sequel to tri-Ace's own *Valkyrie Profile* series. You run around dungeons using a side-scrolling perspective, and then run into enemies to engage them in combat. With four combatants in battle, each is assigned a face button, which commands them to attack a targetted enemy. It does differ slightly from its forebear in a few ways – your attacks can hit multiple enemies if they're next to each other, depending on the type of strike, and your actions are affected by a bar at the bottom of the screen, so certain characters can attack multiple times in a turn. After attacking, you are switched to a guard mode, in which you can command combatants to defend, consuming some of that bar. By stringing together combos, you can also build enough strength to execute super-powerful Demon's Greed attacks. You can assign roles to the 12 characters, using various weapons, like swords, whips, guns, rocket launchers, scythes, and elemental magic. Each character also has affection ratings for each of the others, which changes based on their interactions.

PS4
Exist Archive

The combat is pretty fun, though it does feel like a step backwards compared to the advances made in *Valkyrie Profile 2*. But you'd better enjoy it, because it really is the best thing about the game. Perhaps reflecting its origins as a portable game, there's no overworld or exploration, and the entire thing is mission-based, often sending you through the same dungeon multiple times. There's not much visual variation either, and there are few enemy types, resulting in a flow that quickly becomes repetitive. The story has an interesting premise, but plot points are dished out slowly, and the characters are all typical anime teenagers, occasionally amusing but hardly worth caring about. There are some great ideas here, but it's too undercooked to make it worthwhile in the long run. As it currently stands, it's the last original title developed by tri-Ace, which now mostly works on ports and mobile games.

***Exist Archive* takes the core of the *Valkyrie Profile* exploration and battle systems, and improves some aspects, but the story is still just not that great.**

Chrono Trigger

Developer: Square | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SNES, PS1, DS, WIN

Some 25 years after its release, longtime JRPG fans still point to Square's *Chrono Trigger* as one of the best of the best. Although this was hardly a point of interest at its American release, *Chrono Trigger* resulted from the combined efforts of Hironobu Sakaguchi and Yuji Horii – the masters behind *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*, competitors at that time, and the two most popular JRPG series in the world. Along with this dream team came artwork by Akira Toriyama, the *Dragon Quest* artist, but even more widely known for manga like *Dragon Ball* and *Dr. Slump*. By combining Square's talents at storytelling and aesthetic design with Horii's skilful scenario design and knack for simplicity, the almost-perfect game was created.

The story takes places in the year 1000 AD, as a young boy named Crono visits the local Millennial Fair. Together with a girl named Marle, secretly a princess in disguise, they watch a show put on by the inventor Lucca, who accidentally sends them hurtling 400 years into the past. After assorted shenanigans, they end up time-travelling again, this time into 2300 AD, far into their future, only to find the landscape absolutely devastated. The source of the apocalypse? A being called Lavos, who dropped to the Earth as a meteor, far in the distant past. After witnessing the devastation, the crew swear to find a way to destroy Lavos, to ensure a healthy future for their planet.

Beyond the initial trio, the cast members are all associated with one of the time periods you can visit. Frog is an expert swordsman from 600 AD, cursed with the form of an amphibian; Robo is, of course, a robot from 2300 AD; and Ayla is a cavegirl from 65,000,000 BC. There's also 12,000 BC, during a Dark Age in which a technologically advanced civilisation attempted to use Lavos' power for themselves ... which, of course, is one of the events that contributed towards the world's destruction.

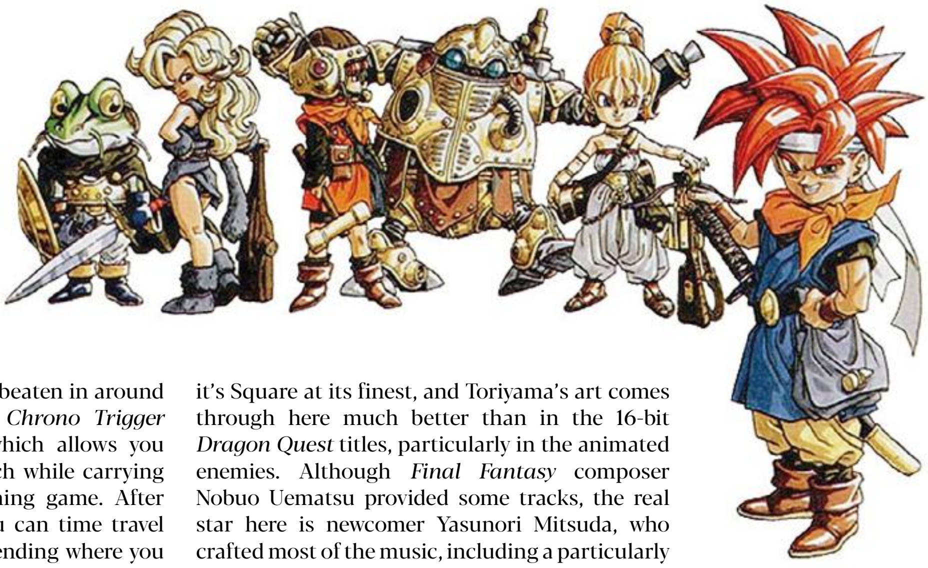
NINTENDO DS
CHRONO TRIGGER

The diverse cast of *Chrono Trigger*, each character associated with one of the time periods you visit, is one of the key reasons that it resonates so strongly.

The *Dragon Quest* series is also known for its snappy scenario design, full of memorable events and NPCs. The story here maintains comedy against dramatic urgency, with plenty of goofy scenarios. The courtroom scene, where Crono is falsely charged with kidnapping Marle and judged for all of his seemingly inconsequential actions at the Millennial Fair, is a highlight. There are also oddball villains, like the trio of Ozzie, Flea, and Slash, along with their more imposing leader Magus. It's also quite compelling to see how the relatively small game world changes across all of the different time periods. Near the game's end, a handful of sub-quests really show off how cool it is to amend the mistakes of the past to change the future. Time travel is such a fertile ground for interesting storytelling that it's a shame few games explore it, although Horii himself tried it later in *Dragon Quest VII*, with less interesting results.

The story is fast paced, and the only real downside of cutting out all the treacle is that the

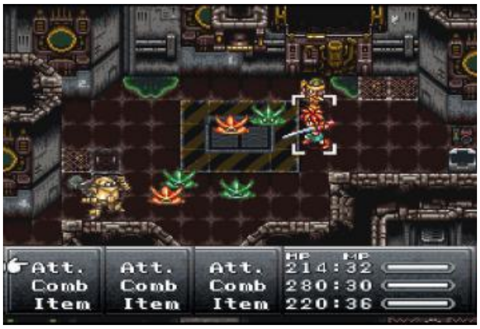
While Crono's spiky red hair-do might be a little too similar to Goku's, the rest of *Chrono Trigger*'s cast is artist Akira Toriyama bringing his A-game.

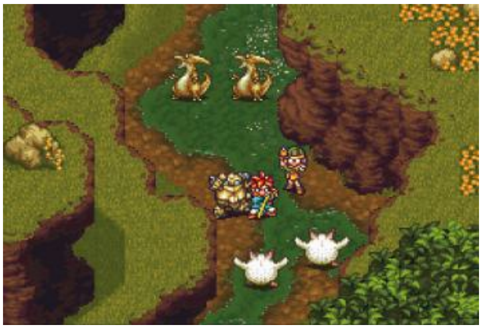


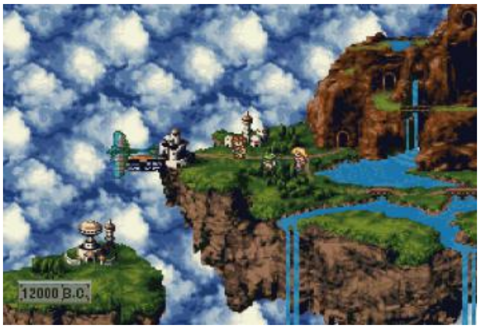
quest is pretty short – it can be beaten in around 15 hours. To counteract this, *Chrono Trigger* introduces the New Game+, which allows you to restart the game from scratch while carrying over the stats from your winning game. After a certain point in the plot, you can time travel directly to fight Lavos, and depending where you are in the story, defeating him will reveal one of over a dozen different endings, making for tons of replayability.

While *Chrono Trigger* is clearly a narrative blend of two of the heavy hitters of the 16-bit JRPG age, for the most part, it really feels more *Final Fantasy* than *Dragon Quest*, probably owing to the fact that it was actually developed by Square. It is progressive is many ways, as random battles are absent, and combat occurs either when colliding with an on-screen foe or (more regularly) at set locations in an area. It uses the same Active Turn Battle System as found in most of the *Final Fantasy* games, but rather than transitioning to a separate battle screen, fights take place right on the field. Since enemy positioning is taken into account (changing for every encounter), area-of-effect skills can be used to attack multiple foes at once. New to *Chrono Trigger* are Double- and Triple-Techs, which are special moves that combine the skills or magic abilities of two or three party members. If there's one downside to the game, it's that it lacks any real character customisation, beyond hunting for *Dragon Quest*-style seeds to tweak stats. And you can only fit three characters into your party at once. But each character has an elemental affinity, and because of the Techs, party selection still plays a big part in your strategy. Visually, it's Square at its finest, and Toriyama's art comes through here much better than in the 16-bit *Dragon Quest* titles, particularly in the animated enemies. Although *Final Fantasy* composer Nobuo Uematsu provided some tracks, the real star here is newcomer Yasunori Mitsuda, who crafted most of the music, including a particularly stirring overture. Each of the time periods calls for a different style of music – for the character themes, towns, maps, and dungeons – and it's all pulled off brilliantly, crafting one of the best soundtracks of its era.

A subsequent PlayStation port added some nice but unnecessary FMV cinematic segments; it also added an extra layer of clunkiness, with noticeable load times and worse music. A later DS port includes the cutscenes but fixes the technical issues; it also re-translates some bits in ways that are more faithful to the original Japanese but removes some fan-favourite dialogue, like Frog's faux medieval speech. Both versions include some extra minor plot points to tie the story more closely to its follow-up, *Chrono Cross*.







Fight dinosaurs in the distant past and monsters in the distant future – herein lies one of the biggest appeals of *Chrono Trigger*.

Chrono Cross

Developer: Square | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1

Chrono Cross is only barely a sequel to *Chrono Trigger*. *Trigger*'s claim to fame was based on the combinations of Square and Enix, *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*, Sakaguchi and Horii. With the Enix folk unavailable to participate in a follow-up, Square was left to its own devices to take up the task. Even Square's key players had either moved on or their work had evolved – writer Masato Kato had since been in charge of penning *Xenogears*, and his scripting tended to waft into metaphysical territories; musician Yasunori Mitsuda had been bitten by the Celtic bug, giving his music a distinct sound that, while achieving excellence in the field of video game music, lacked the variety that gave *Trigger* so much of its energy; and Hironobu Sakaguchi was too busy with his work on the movie *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*. Akira Toriyama's distinctive designs were out – his spot was taken by Nobuteru Yuuki, previously of anime like *Escaflowne*. Ultimately, *Chrono Cross* neither looks, nor sounds, nor plays like its predecessor.

Indeed, *Chrono Cross* does not intend to revisit the adventures of Crono, Lucca and Marle. Rather, it expands significantly on both the mythos of the series and the concept of time travel. The time travel in *Trigger* was very light-hearted and straightforward – if something was wrong in the present, you simply went back to the past and corrected it. *Cross* asks a question: what happens to that "bad" timeline, before it's corrected? It doesn't simply disappear – rather, a parallel universe is formed, and this is where we find the hero, a young fisher boy, Serge.

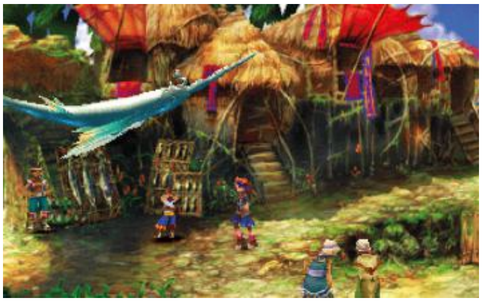
At the outset, Serge gets sucked into an alternate world. It's largely the same as his own, with one huge difference – he learns that his otherworld self drowned when he was younger.

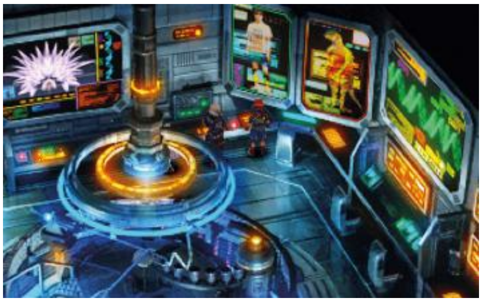
Although seemingly insignificant, and unrecognised at first, this event has completely reshaped the history and events of the "otherworld". He quickly meets up with a bounty hunter named Kid, and eventually amasses a huge party to help untangle the web of time gone awry. Most of the game takes place within the El Nido archipelago, a part of the game world that didn't exist in *Trigger* (for reasons that are explained, eventually). As a result, much of the game has a breezy, tropical feeling. You routinely slide between "home" and the "otherworld" – although they are visually similar, they are made distinct thanks to the soundtrack variations, with the "home" versions generally being light and bouncy, and the "otherworld" dark and mysterious. The sound quality is incredible, considering that it's all sequenced – even *Cross*' greatest critics will admit this is one of the best video game soundtracks of all time, particularly the intro track, "Time's Scar".

Ultimately, though, *Cross*' biggest mistake is that it underestimates the affection fans had for its predecessor. Lucca, for example, plays a major role in the plot, but she appears only very briefly, in flashbacks. Old heroes are casually murdered,

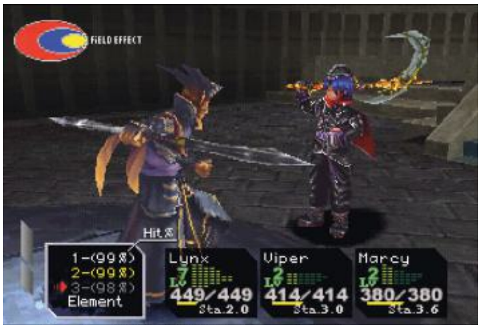
PlayStation
Chrono Cross
SQUARESOFT

While it met with critical praise, *Chrono Cross* is far less lauded among fans, where the general consensus is that it's an excellent game with a brilliant soundtrack, but a poor sequel to *Chrono Trigger*.





The story starts off with a low-tech tropical setting, but veers into science fiction as it goes on – it does deal with time travel after all.

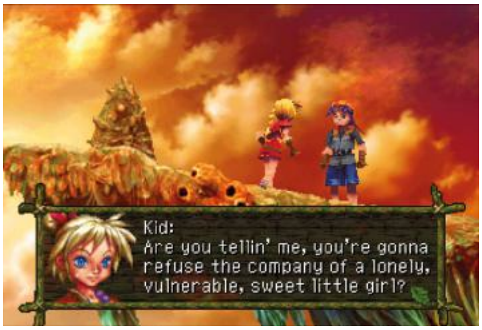


and the events that link the two are barely coherent. Characters like the swordsman Glenn and the floating magician Guile play tribute to *Trigger*'s cast (Frog and Magus, respectively), but they have no real connection otherwise.

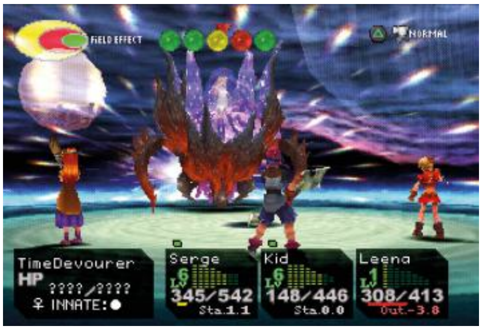
Of course, it's easy to brand *Cross* as fan fiction, twisting the events and characters of a previous work into something that was never originally intended. *Cross*' link to *Trigger* revolves around the unexplained fate of a minor character, going on to make a whole game out of it. It's basically an expanded version of the sound novel *Radical Dreamers*, a Super Famicom Satellaview game also written by Masato Kato. (That game's plot, involving a trio of thieves sneaking into a mansion, also appears as a subplot here.) However, even in its best moments, it never captures the endearing tone of *Trigger*. Its character roster is huge – 44 in total – but they're mostly more weird than likeable. For example, there's a sentient radish, an obnoxious pink talking puppy, a dancing straw doll, and a cyborg with ridiculous hair. Most of them have unique speech patterns or accents to make them stand out, but few are tied into the story in a meaningful way.

Cross' battle system is also quite different from its predecessor's, though it's a positive change. *Trigger*'s combat was just a variation of *Final Fantasy*'s Active Time Battle system. In *Cross*, outside of a few Double and Triple Techs, there is little resemblance to the original game. Characters have a set number of stamina points, with stronger attacks costing more – you can deplete these and run into the negative, causing a longer delay before that character's next turn. Each of the party members and enemies is assigned a colour – six are used, in three opposing pairs, with effects between opposites being fiercer. In addition to the character affinities, each spell or ability has its own colour, which can again be used to attack opposing elements. The most important aspect is the Field Element, which changes its colour, depending on the attacks being used, whether by friend or foe. You can play strategic games of tug-of-war by gathering particular party members, equipping them with particular spells, and overwhelming the bad guys through these means. Combat is also quite user friendly. During any fight, you can flee and regroup without penalty, reducing the appearance of frustrating game over screens. Most non-boss fights are optional, too, and stat growth is capped until you beat larger foes, eliminating the need for grinding. It also includes its predecessor's New Game+ feature, with a new fast-forward function to speed things up, so you can unlock several non-canon endings.

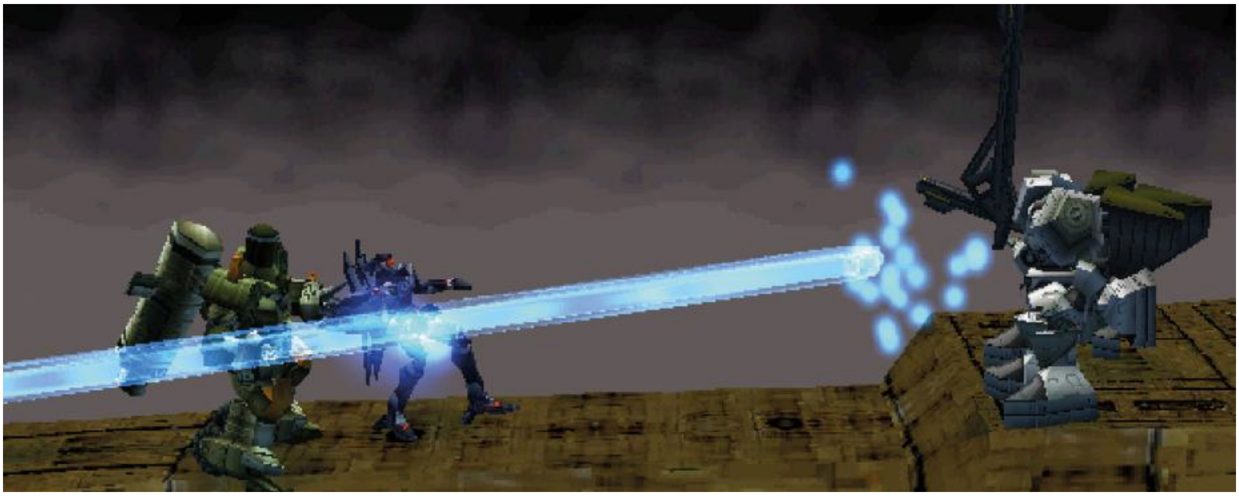
Considering the fervent fanbase and Square's tendency to milk its properties, the lack of a third *Chrono* title is a mystery; rumours of a purported sequel called *Chrono Break* evaporated into thin air. As such, *Chrono Cross* remains a divisive element of Square's legacy, though it's genuinely excellent on its merits.



Kid:
Are you tellin' me, you're gonna refuse the company of a lonely, vulnerable, sweet little girl?



***Chrono Cross*' tie-ins with *Chrono Trigger* are indeed quite curious, as exemplified by its rather rushed climax.**



Xenogears

Developer: Square | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1

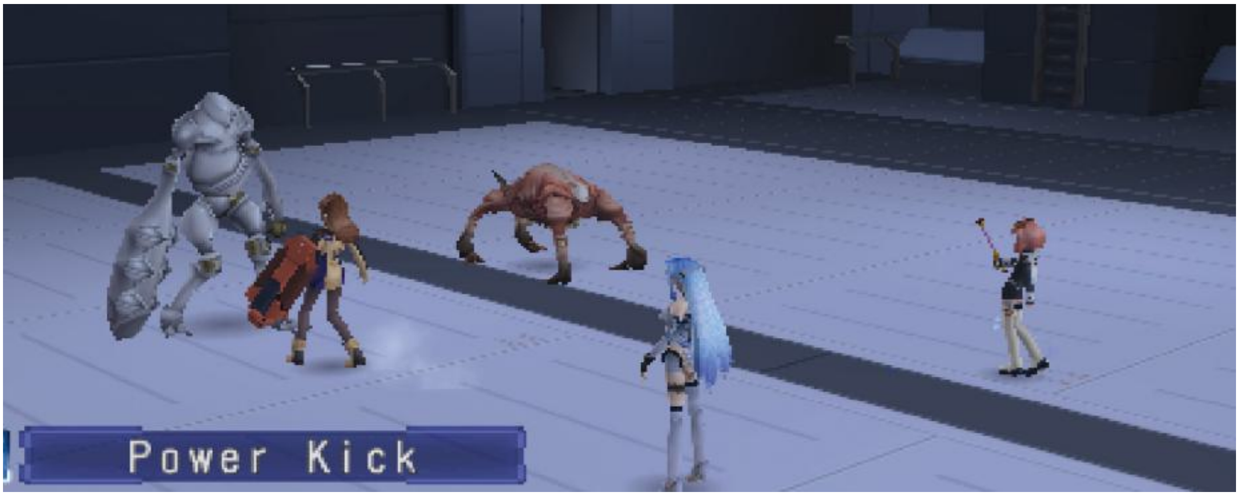
Xenogears is the follow-up from the *Chrono Trigger* development team, though it bears little resemblance to it. Directed by Tetsuya Takahashi, a graphic designer on many earlier titles, with a script by Masato Kato, this sci-fi mecha game is one of the most ambitious RPGs of its era, though it also over-extends its reach.

The hero is a young man named Fei Fong Wong, whose village has come under attack by invaders. Nearby, he discovers an abandoned mecha, called a Gear, and attempts to defend his home, only to accidentally destroy the whole place. After being exiled, Fei learns that his destiny is much more significant than he expected, leading to the discovery of the roles he's played in the origin of his planet and the evolution of humanity. Some of his companions include Elly Van Houten, one of those who attacked Fei's village, who quickly allies with him; Citan Uzuki, a bespectacled doctor and swordsman; Bart Fatima, a pirate who roams the seas of sand; Billy Lee Black, a shotgun-wielding priest; and Chu-Chu, a somewhat out-of-place pink fluffy rodent. All of this culminates in a religious conspiracy, bringing into question the act of fighting against God. This topic had been touched upon in a handful of other Japanese games, but at the time, for American audiences, it seemed remarkably innovative, and the many plot twists still remain captivating.

Though its creators deny it, *Xenogears* appears to draw a lot of inspiration from the mid-'90s anime classic *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Both involve giant mechas pulling off crazy stunts. Both have heavy religious and philosophical overtones, often mangling Christian symbolism to unintentionally hilarious effect. And where *Evangelion*'s TV series had an unfinished ending, *Xenogears* has its infamous Disc 2. After the first CD is completed, the main characters narrate the story, jumping from scenario to scenario, only occasionally allowing the player to explore a dungeon or fight a battle. If nothing else, Disc 2 shows how much backstory was written into the world of *Xenogears*, even if it couldn't be squeezed into a single game.

The rest of the game is pretty good too, if not particularly innovative. The battles – which are either fought on foot or from inside the mechas – are enjoyable, even if their depth doesn't hold a candle to that of the story. In mêlée combat, characters can string together various types of move to create combos, and while it's tremendously satisfying to pummel enemies, there's not really much depth to it. The mecha battles lack these moves, and instead focus on conserving fuel, which drains with every move. The exploration is a bit clumsy, especially in the dungeons that involve platforming, but the architecture feels more three-dimensional than in most RPGs of the era. The soundtrack, too, is a high point, consisting of both entrancing world music and powerful orchestrations, provided by Yasunori Mitsuda. The slow text speed drags down the pacing, though otherwise it's a classic.

Square's game development schedules were stuck to tight deadlines, resulting in games like *Xenogears,* which were just way too ambitious to be presented properly ... but it still turned out pretty well, regardless.



Xenosaga

Developer: Monolith Soft | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): PS2, DS

After leaving Squaresoft to form Monolith Soft, two of the masterminds behind *Xenogears* – Tetsuya Takahashi and his wife Kaori Tanaka (also known as Soraya Saga) started work on *Xenosaga*. Originally conceived as a six-part series, *Xenosaga* was intended to be a new story, but also a reboot of some of the themes and ideas Takahashi had come up with for *Xenogears*.

Xenosaga Episode I follows Shion Uzuki, an engineer at Vector Industries, who is leading the research and development for a battle android known as KOS-MOS. Her purpose was to fight the Gnosis, a mysterious and dangerous entity that appeared to resemble ghosts. Shion eventually finds out that these beings have far more significance in their existence and purpose than initially thought. The two are quickly thrown into a huge conflict between the Galaxy Federation and the U-TIC Organisation. In *Episode I*, we are also introduced to the Zohar, a monolithic artefact that was a source of power and all sorts of secrets. This object will serve as the driving force for many of the conflicts and character motivations throughout the trilogy.

Xenosaga is a very cinematic experience. *Episode I* features over eight hours of cutscenes, so you can expect lengthy and frequent FMVs that are, for the most part, well rendered for their time. The futuristic atmosphere is as imaginative as it is engrossing. Many of the characters are complex and flawed, and often suffering from some sort of trauma that will haunt them throughout the series. It's all done in a surprisingly realistic manner, with the generally strong performances from the English voice cast helping to bring credibility to the story. The English localisation of *Xenosaga Episode I* did see some changes in certain cutscenes, most notably in one of the more infamous and disturbing scenes involving one of the main antagonists.

Morning, KOS-MOS.
How do you feel?

The battle system is similar to that in *Xenogears,* in that you can enter commands with the controller's face buttons to chain attacks and even perform special deathblows. In case you desire more health and firepower, your characters can pilot giant robots called A.G.W.S. units. Every turn has a specific situational effect applied to it, such as an increased critical hit rate, an increase in the amount of Boost Gauge gained, or a multiplier for the Ether, Tech or Skill points received at the end of the battle. These effects will rotate, with the current one displayed in what is referred to as the Event Slot. By spending your accumulated Boost Gauge, you can Boost a party member or grant them an extra turn. However enemies can do the same, and reap the same benefits. All of this results in a rather unique spin on the traditional turn-based formula.

With an interesting combat system and a great soundtrack by Yasunori Mitsuda, *Xenosaga Episode I* started the series off strongly, and laid the groundwork for an intriguing story that will leave you wanting more.

PlayStation 2
Xenosaga
namco

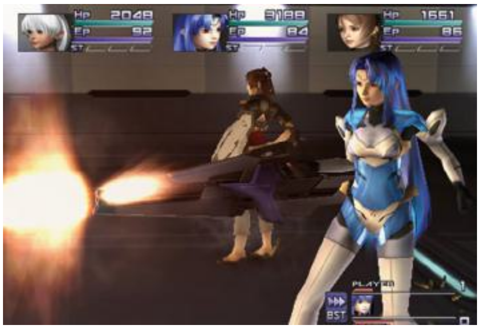
The *Xenosaga* series was originally presented to flesh out the tale that couldn't be fully told in *Xenogears,* though in practice, it turned out quite differently.

Xenosaga Episode II

Developer: Monolith Soft | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): PS2, DS

Xenosaga Episode II: Jenseits von Gut und Böse picks up right after the ending of the first game. Although most of the *Episode I* characters return, some of their beloved English voice actors do not. Musically speaking, Yasunori Mitsuda was replaced by Yuki Kajiura and Shinji Hosoe, providing a soundtrack that's excellent, but very different in style, with a more electronic feel. There's also a noticeable difference in the graphical style, as the characters seem taller, skinnier and feature a more realistic look, somewhat losing that stylised anime aesthetic from *Episode I*.

The battle system saw some new additions, such as air combos, team attacks and a Break system. Every attack you perform will hit a specific Zone. Should you hit an enemy's Zones in the correct order you can Break them, rendering them stunned and significantly lowering their defence capability. Early on, enemies can be put in the Break state after just one or two attacks, although as you progress you will encounter enemies who require multiple attacks in succession to successfully Break them. You can address this by sacrificing a turn to Stock, up to three times, which will grant you the ability to attack more strongly in your following turn. While this system sounds interesting on paper, it has some rather unfortunate drawbacks. Enemies have a lot of HP and incredibly high defence, to the point where in order to even leave a scratch, you need to Stock very frequently. Even normal encounters can become really long, with several turns during which you stand there taking damage, while you hope to eventually return the favour. Your characters can also now pilot robots called Ein Sof or E.S. units. These robots are powered by vessels of anima, which draw power from the Zohar, allowing for stronger and infinitely more versatile machines.



Xenosaga Episode II is that rare beast, an RPG with no currency, and the few shops you come across are mostly interested in trading items. It's also a much shorter game than *Episode I*, clocking in at about 20–25 hours for the main story. There are, however, also over 30 side missions, which can add a few extra hours. Once again, some disturbing scenes were altered during localisation, and probably to maintain the Teen rating. Despite the flaws with the battle system, the story is still engaging, and the cutscenes feature excellent compositions by Yuki Kajiura, who would return to compose music for *Episode III*. Strangely enough, this was the only game in the series to receive a European release.

Xenosaga Episode I and *Episode II* were bundled together and released on the Nintendo DS in 2006. This version was a sprite-based RPG, complete with anime-style portraits for all of the characters. It's not a straight retelling either, as there are substantial differences in the story, giving a reason for fans to give it a shot. Obviously it's downgraded from a technical perspective, lacking the cutscenes and voices, but it's an interesting package. Unfortunately, this version never left Japan.

PlayStation 2
Xenosaga
II
namco

***Xenosaga Episode II* may be a shorter experience, but it moves the story along rather nicely.**

CENTER ARCH
number LOT

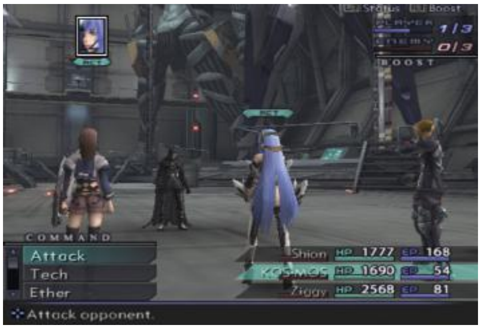
Xenosaga Episode III

Developer: Monolith Soft | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PS2

While *Xenosaga* was devised as a six-episode epic, the middling commercial performance meant that the series needed to be cut short. In consequence, the third and final entry did what it could to wrap everything up. To say they went all-out with *Xenosaga Episode III: Also Sprach Zarathustra* would be an understatement. Visually, they managed to find a happy middle ground between *Episode I*'s heavily stylised art style and the more realistic proportions in *Episode II*. This, combined with some very clever use of lighting in the environments, made for some of the best-looking visuals on the system.

Episode III begins as Shion attempts to break into the Vector's secret U.M.N. facility to uncover the secrets of the organisation she has been associated with for so long. The story takes place a year after *Xenosaga Episode II*, and most of the characters and villains are back for one final hurrah. It also seems that quite a bit occurred between *Episode II* and *III*, which is detailed in an in-game database accessible from the title screen. It's highly recommended that you view this database before even starting the game, as it contains a lot of information that will properly ease you into the beginning of *Episode III*.

Combat has been streamlined significantly, and that's definitely for the better. The Boost system returns, but the event slot and face button combo system has been removed in favour of a more traditional turn-based approach. What really shines about this system is its speed. Attack animations are quick, hit hard, and are shown from a wide variety of camera angles, making each feel fresh and exciting. The E.S. battles benefit the most from this, as battles now become these breathtaking showpieces of robots flying around and doing all sorts of crazy moves and stunts, along with character cut-ins and follow-up attacks to make them extra dramatic. This makes for some truly exhilarating battles, despite the incredibly simple mechanics. Another neat feature is that at the cost of multiple Boost levels, your character can perform a powerful special attack. If this attack defeats an enemy, you will gain a Finishing Strike bonus that grants you a lot more experience from the battle. One of the biggest surprises about this game is that side characters like Miyuki, Canaan, and Allen are actually playable for brief sections of the game.



PlayStation 2
Xenosaga
Also sprach Zarathustra

The grand finale for the series might have come early, but it delivered a memorable experience for the fans.

As if that weren't enough, the original actresses returned to play Shion and KOS-MOS, and their performances were just as memorable, if not more so, than in *Episode I*. *Episode III* is also filled with plenty of references and nods to *Xenogears* in terms of the character designs and certain areas. As with the other games, the North American version had some cutscene modifications due to censorship. Blood was either significantly toned down or outright removed. Fortunately those edits didn't change the fact that *Xenosaga Episode III* delivered a satisfying payoff for the story and concluded what is one of the most fascinating and memorable trilogies in gaming.

Xenoblade Chronicles

Developer: Monolith Soft | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): WII, 3DS, NSW

Xenoblade Chronicles was initially intended for release in Japan and Europe only, excluding North America. Despite the positive ratings and reception, it seemed that Nintendo of America wasn't interested in publishing the title, much to the displeasure of fans. That didn't stop genre enthusiasts: they imported the game, and started fan campaigns, like Operation Rainfall, to raise awareness. The game was localised by Nintendo of Europe, which paved the way for an American release down the line, in 2012.

The game's setting is rather unique. Two titans, known as Bionis and Mechonis, are suspended in time in the middle of an epic duel, their swords mid-clash. Life has since flourished on top of these two titans, leading to the establishment of various races, most notably the Homs on Bionis and the Mechon on Mechonis. However the battle between the titans continues through their descendants. Over time, various stories and tales have been told regarding their world's origins, including one involving a legendary sword, the Monado, said to be hidden on the Bionis. This eventually comes into the hands of the Homs from a settlement known as Colony 9. You play as Shulk, a young boy fascinated by technology, who spends his time researching and trying to comprehend the secrets of the Monado.

Xenoblade Chronicles is often said to have MMO-like gameplay, in that the worlds are big, you can take on a large number of side quests at the same time, you auto-attack enemies, your skills have real-time cool-down, and your health recovers gradually as long as you are not currently in a battle. In some ways, it feels like an evolution of *Final Fantasy XII*, which drew from similar sources. However, Monolith sought a way to make combat more meaningful, compared to *FFXII*'s more automated approach. The twist in *Xenoblade* is that Shulk's Monado allows him to see the future. At various moments in battle you will be shown a vision of the enemy performing a powerful attack on one or more of your party members, along with how much damage will be inflicted. You will then be given a small amount of time to try and defend against that attack, warn your party members and tell them how to counter it, or try to stun the enemy to prevent it. If you successfully counter the attack, you have successfully changed the future, and your party will gain a temporary buff.

Each of the playable characters has a different playstyle, complete with unique mechanics and three separate skill trees offering a large variety of builds and ways for you to play the game. In addition there is an affinity rating between your party members, which can increase through character interactions within battles, or based on decisions made in cutscenes and side quests. This can enable you to view special heart-to-hearts, in which two or more characters can have a conversation

Wii
Xenoblade
CHRONICLES

Despite being a late release on the Wii, *Xenoblade Chronicles* was an impressive showpiece for the console.

that further develops their relationship. This affinity system also extends to NPCs within the game's major towns. It really goes a long way towards fleshing out these characters.

The areas of the game are wide and offer you plenty to find and learn. Each location feels distinct, with its own enemies, loot, and Unique Monsters. Those are something like bosses, and roam the overworld, among the normal enemies but typically far stronger than any of them. Because of this, it's not unusual for you to encounter an enemy of a much higher level than you, even in the early sections of the game. Thankfully there is no real penalty for dying in battle: you simply respawn at either the beginning of the area or the last checkpoint. While it might sound unbalanced, this adds a certain element of strategy to navigating these environments, as there is a lot to consider. Weather conditions, your party's level, the sounds your characters are making, and your enemies' fields of vision will all affect not only which enemies can appear, but how they will react to you as you traverse.

Perhaps due to the fact that this game was not intended for North American release, the game features many British voice actors, with one of the more noteworthy names among the cast being Jenna Coleman. She would go on to play Clara Oswald in *Dr. Who* about a year after the European release of the game. The cast put in very believable performances, and certain plot points are handled in a shockingly refreshing manner. It's all accompanied by an excellent soundtrack, blessed by the hands of multiple composers, including Yoko Shimomura, known for her work on the *Kingdom Hearts* series. *Xenoblade* may have had a bit of a hard time reaching North American fans, but that did not stop it from becoming quite the sleeper hit at the time, and one of the more memorable RPGs of its era.

A port for the New Nintendo 3DS was released, titled *Xenoblade Chronicles 3D.* This port is unsurprisingly scaled back in terms of its visuals, so it can fit on one 3DS cartridge. It does feature a model viewer and a music player, and is compatible with the Shulk amiibo. While it was an acceptable mobile compromise when it came out, it was made redundant when a remake called *Xenoblade Chronicles Definitive Editio*n was released in 2020 for the Nintendo Switch. This includes redone character models and some quality-of-life enhancements, as well as a brand new epilogue called Xenoblade Future Connected. This relatively short story follows Shulk, Melia, and two of Riki's children as they explore the Bionis' Shoulder, an area that was cut from the original release. It's a nice little story that wraps up a couple of loose ends from the main story.

LV040
Skyray
Select Arts
Change Target
Move Camera
Check
Elemental Discharge
Attack using a summoned Elemental

Location
Storage Depot
Mechon M53X
Select Arts
Change Target
Move Camera
Damage Immunity
Check
Activate Monado
Unleashes the power of the Monado

The way environments change based on the time of day and weather conditions goes a long way towards making each area feel unique.

Xenoblade Chronicles X

Developer: Monolith Soft | Released: 2015 | Platform(s): WIIU

Xenoblade Chronicles X is a completely new experience, unrelated to the first game and featuring a fresh cast and story. Unlike the previous games in the series, you can create the main character, and even pick a voice for them in battle.

In July 2054, a war broke out between humans and aliens. The Coalition government started Project Exodus, whereby humanity was to flee Earth, migrating to a new world by way of massive Ark ships, big enough to contain entire cities, their civilian populations cryogenically frozen inside pods. An American Ark called the White Whale encounters the aliens during its travels and crash-lands on a distant planet called Mira. Its cryo-pods are ejected and launched, scattering them across the planet. You play as one of the frozen civilians, who encounters a mysterious woman named Elma as she awakens you and frees you from your pod. She then brings you to New Los Angeles, the crash site of the White Whale and the city carried aboard it. And thus begins humanity's existence on planet Mira.

The world of Mira is enormous, but, unlike in *Xenoblade Chronicles*, a large amount of the world is available for you to explore from the outset, with most areas transitioning seamlessly. Later in the game, you will gain access to giant robots called Skells, which not only grant you the gear necessary to take on the bigger enemies, but also let you gain access to even more areas. Once you finally gain the flight module, the sky's the limit in terms of where you can go in this game. *Xenoblade Chronicles X* isn't focused on one central narrative, but rather tells day-to-day stories about the people of New LA. Many of the biggest and most interesting things to happen in the city occur inside optional quests that can be missed if you aren't going out of your way to look for them. It's a shame, because these side stories touch on some interesting topics and themes, such as religion, immigration, and racism. It would have been nice to see more of that in the main story missions.

The game's combat has been heavily expanded from that of the first game. You now have classes, and all sorts of arts you can acquire, which will dramatically change the flow of battle. There are also several new weapons available, such as dual machine guns and beam sabers. Enemies now actually have attributes and stats proportional to their size. Thus, regardless of an enemy's level, if they're bigger than you, they will still have higher defence and will hit harder.

The soundtrack is quite unusual. Composed by Hiroyuki Sawano, typically known for his work on anime soundtracks, it uses quite a lot of vocals, much of it in English and usually quite cheesy. It's pretty good, though some parts get repetitive, and the vocals can drown out the character dialogue.

While the apparent lack of a centralised narrative might turn some players away, *Xenoblade Chronicles X* offers a sense of freedom and depth in the gameplay that is rarely seen in JRPGs. That aspect alone makes it a notable title in the Wii U's library.

Wii U
Xenoblade Chronicles X

***Xenoblade Chronicles X* might not have been the sequel some fans expected, but was nonetheless an interesting title for the Wii U.**

Current Objective ZR

Xenoblade Chronicles 2

Developer: Monolith Soft | Released: 2017 | Platform(s): NSW

Xenoblade Chronicles 2 takes place in a new world called Alrest, where living beings are thriving atop or inside various massive titans floating in the sky. The story follows a boy named Rex, a salvager who is enlisted for a mission to recover a hidden treasure. He eventually discovers that this treasure is actually a woman in stasis. Rex is then betrayed and killed by one of the people sent to accompany him. The girl, named Pyra, then awakens, and revives Rex. In return Rex promises to take her to Elysium, a paradise that has been the subject of many legends within their world. Rex soon learns that she is an Aegis, a legendary being possessing great powers and key to many of the world's secrets. Many others in Alrest are trying to get their hands on Pyra, but Rex vows to protect her no matter what, until the duo reaches Elysium.

As you play the game, you will encounter entities known as Blades, and be able to recruit them. The Blades grant their users unique weapons and also have other abilities that can be used to navigate the environment. Many puzzles and obstacles throughout the game will require you to have a particular Blade or combination of Blades in your party. You can obtain Blades by awakening core crystals found on your journey. The Blade you receive is usually random, although there are a few specific ones given to you in the course of the story. There are two types of Blade: Common and Rare. The Common Blades are generic allies that, while useful, have abilities and potential that are often limited in comparison to those of Rare ones. Rare Blades have unique designs, backstories, and quests, plus skills that are far more powerful. However, due to their random nature, it can take several hours to encounter one.

Pyra
Well I think you are adorable like this. I like it.

One of the greatest strengths of *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* is your freedom to travel across the various titans not just to reach the next cutscene, but to discover the stories and cultures of the various regions. The music, by Yasunori Mitsuda, ACE, Kenji Hiramatsu, and Manami Kiyota, features a wide variety of compositions, making every scene and area stand out. All this helps to make a satisfying and heartwarming experience of watching Rex grow as he discovers the world around him, and how this affects his relationship with Pyra.

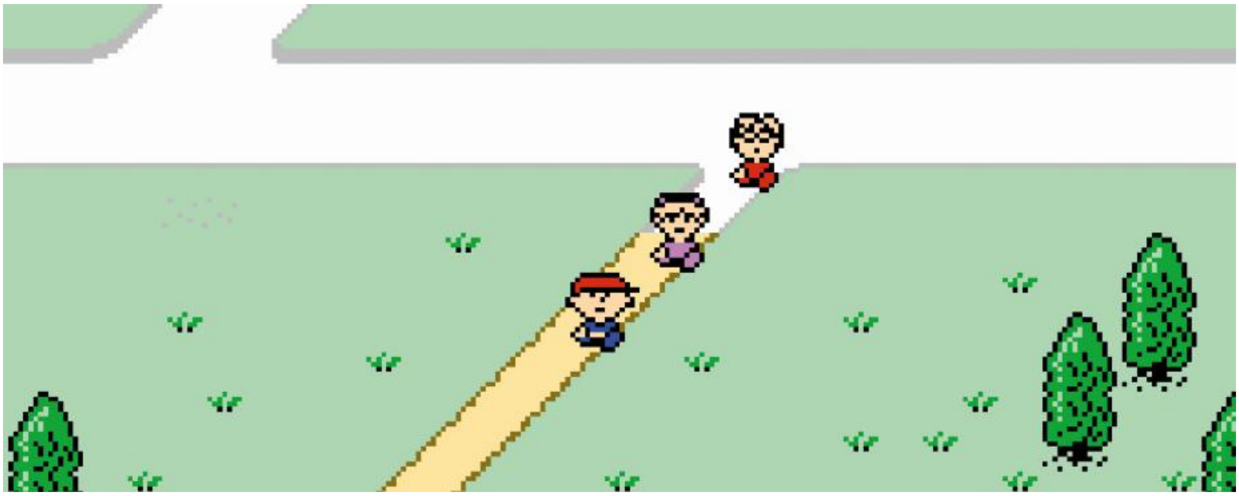
The combat system is similar to that in previous *Xenoblade* games, but streamlined in the sense that skills are now mapped to dedicated buttons, and you can no longer attack and move at the same time. While it sounds very limiting, the combat really opens up in the later portions of the game, especially after gaining more Blades.

Xenoblade Chronicles 2 can take upwards of 90 hours to finish, and you can easily spend hundreds of hours more just getting lost in all of it. It's a long journey, but one well worth going on.

In 2018, an expansion subtitled *Torna: The Golden Country* was released. This game takes place 500 years before the events of the main story, and features a faster, enhanced battle system. While it can be played and enjoyed separately from the base game, it is recommended that you experience both to get the most out of the story.

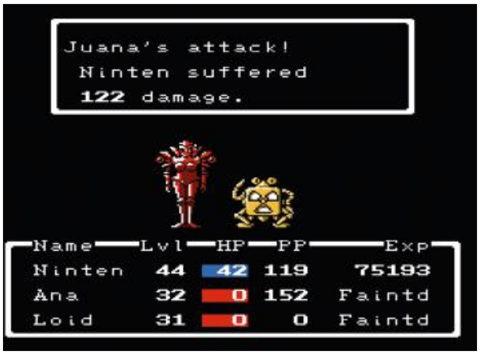
Xenoblade Chronicles 2

The release of *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* was a great way to round off the Switch's successful first year.



Mother

Developer: Nintendo/Pax Softnica | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): FC, GBA, WIIU



Juana's attack!
Ninten suffered
122 damage.

```
Name   Lvl  HP   PP    Exp
Ninten  44  42  119  75193
Ana     32   0  152  Faintd
Loid    31   0    0  Faintd
```

Final Fantasy and *Dragon Quest* established the primary templates for the JRPG genre that would be iterated upon in various styles for decades to come. These games were major players all in their own right, all made by developers that have found substantial success as a result. However, way back in 1989, a game was released, with Nintendo's support, by a man who wasn't, and still isn't, a figure in the industry. Shigesato Itoi was not a programmer nor an artist, he was an essayist. At the time, his works primarily consisted of ad copy and a few public statements; in more recent years he's been running a website known as Hobo Nikkan Itoi Shinbun, which is dedicated to "creating good mood". During a hospital stay in the late '80s, he played *Dragon Quest II*, and was inspired to make a game with more emotional depth. This very different perspective resulted in what would go on to be one of the most thought-provoking RPG series ever made, starting with a Famicom game bearing the rather humble title of *Mother*.

The story goes that in the early 1900s a mysterious event occurred in a small town in rural America, resulting in the disappearance of a couple by the names of George and Maria. Years later, George returned, but Maria was never heard from again. George never spoke of this, but began research into psychic powers. The game begins 80 years later, with the player taking control of George's young grandson, Ninten, as his family's home comes under sudden, unprovoked attack by a poltergeist. Possessing the power of telepathy, Ninten begins to investigate strange occurrences throughout the region, and to find out just what his grandfather's connection to it all is.

From a mechanical perspective, *Mother* is rather basic. Taking clear inspiration from *Dragon Quest*, one traverses an overworld, visits towns, enters places that various agents of evil would rather you didn't. It has turn-based combat against a black backdrop, a party of up to three people, and magic spells presented as psychic powers. What makes *Mother* stand out, however, is its setting. Rather than being some sort of medieval fantasy, like most of its forebears, the game instead features a relatively modern landscape. One visits zoos, hospitals, and department stores, while dealing with threats such as wild dogs, hippies, aliens, and very angry cars. Rather than swords and staves, Ninten and his allies utilise baseball bats, frying pans, yo-yos, slingshots and other domestic items to save the world.

While on the basic side by modern standards, *Mother*'s writing is the highlight of the feature. Filled to the brim with charm, it treads the line between its sad, even sombre, story, and its quirky humour, managing it all rather well. Ninten's father only exists on the other end of a telephone line, always working and never able to see his family, yet able to deposit thousands of dollars into his son's bank account and save the game. The humourous aspects aren't just limited to the dialogue either;

According to *Nintendo Power* magazine, the English NES version of *Earthbond* was scheduled for release in 1991, but never made it to market. The reasons have never been made clear.

sometimes, the player runs into situations where the silliness is rampant, such as fighting with a bat that tries to make sense of what's going on, only to retreat into complete confusion. Elsewhere, there's a bar that the player can guide their party of children into, then sit down to have a drink with a lady and proceed to get arrested. The game keeps you on your toes, never quite able to figure out what to expect next.

The themes of memories, melodies, and love are strongly present throughout the game, and nothing demonstrates this better than its other major highlight: the music. While later entries in the series could claim to have better writing, better combat, better visuals and more memorable characters, the music of the original still stands out strongly. While *Mother* took its combat blueprint from of *Dragon Quest*, it looked at the orchestrations that the original chiptunes were based on, and ran wild. Each major track in the game has a soundtrack companion with fully vocalised English lyrics, released in 1989; critical reception of the soundtrack included comparisons to the Beatles. The most recognisable example is "Pollyanna" sung by Catherine Warwick. "Eight Melodies", the most narratively important track in the game, was sung by the St. Paul's Cathedral Choir, an organisation dating back to the 12th century.

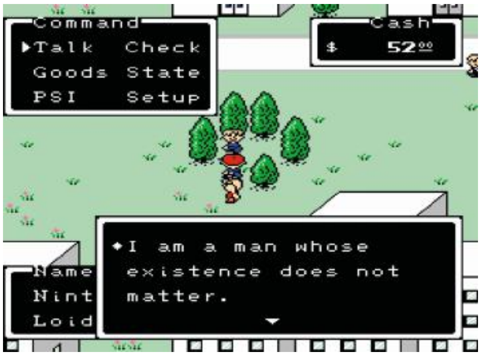
While the writing and presentation are superb, the gameplay itself is quite rough and unforgiving. Owing to Itoi's inexperience and an encroaching deadline, the game features long stretches of what seem to be filler dungeons, with uninteresting layouts and designs made worse by the high encounter rate. In addition, the game becomes distinctly more difficult partway through, leading to widespread advisories from experienced players: take advantage of relevant set pieces and power up the levels, which will help offset the significant damage and excessive deaths otherwise expected in your party; and use a guaranteed-escape power to skip combat entirely.

Mother was initially intended to see Western publication, and a prototype of the translated game, bearing the name *EarthBound*, was made, but cancelled before seeing release. The prototype was auctioned off to a collector and subsequently found its way onto the internet, becoming the first playable English version; some sprites were censored (like the smoking crow enemies), some names were changed, and the ending was expanded upon. The Game Boy Advance port, which comprised both this game and its sequel, included these changes. Despite the lack of release, the effort taught Nintendo lessons about considering international audiences during development, leading them to include alterations even before the initial release in Japan. In 2015, *Mother* finally saw Western release on the Wii U eShop under the name *EarthBound Beginnings*.

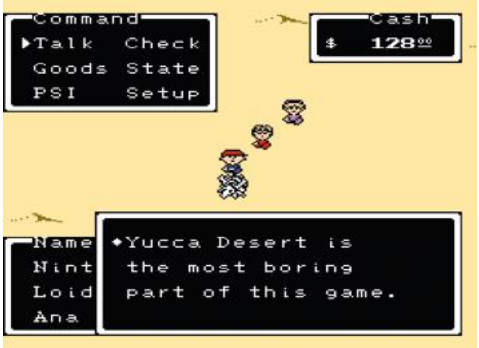
While by no means perfect, *Mother* is a labour of love that carries with it the desire to inspire, as emphasised by the fact that Itoi wanted girls to be able to enjoy and appreciate the game just as much as boys, and reflected this in its marketing. While here in the West it's often overshadowed by its sequels, *Mother* remains a very important piece of history, as the game that dared to be different, made by a man not from the industry. No crying until the end.

MOTHER
攻略ガイドブック

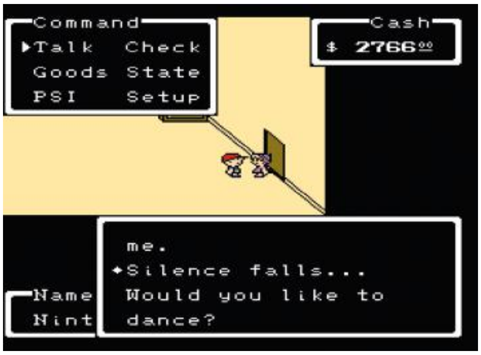
The bright red packaging of the *Mother* series has been its trademark since the beginning, though strategy guide cover (above) gives a slightly better idea of the characters in the game.



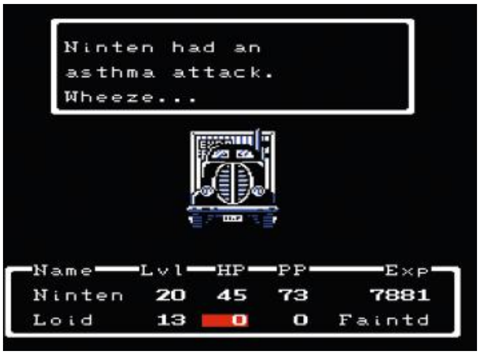
•I am a man whose existence does not matter.



•Yucca Desert is the most boring part of this game.

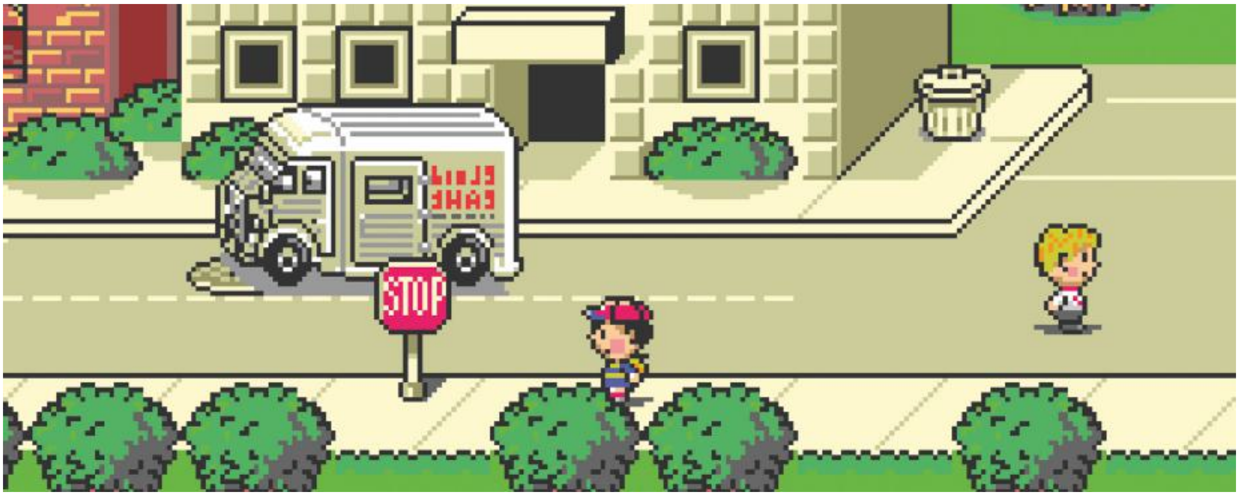


me.
•Silence falls...
Would you like to dance?



Ninten had an asthma attack.
Wheeze...

Name	Lvl	HP	PP	Exp
Ninten	20	45	73	7881
Loid	13	0	0	Faintd



EarthBound

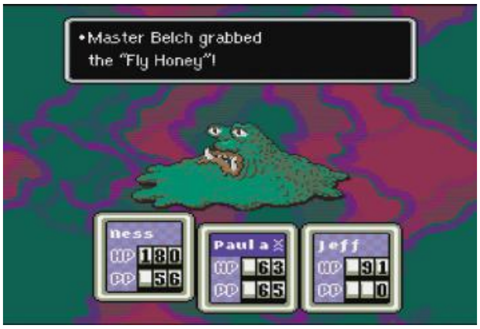
Developer: Nintendo | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SNES, GBA

While *Mother's* story was one of broken families and love without boundaries, entrancing those who played and stuck with it, the gameplay was rather unbalanced and the pacing of its story was quite uneven, leaving those with less time and inclination unable to appreciate those things. So, when talk of a sequel started to emerge some years later, with Itoi once again at the helm, there were lessons from the original game to pay attention to. Five years after the initial game's launch, *Mother 2* was released, localised in the West as *EarthBound*.

The game opens uneasily, to the alien sounds of spacecraft, before depicting UFOs laying waste to human civilisation while the words THE WAR AGAINST GIYGAS hang over the view and the screams of people echo amongst the sounds of destruction, the threat of Giygas returning someday having apparently been realised. Appropriately for the series, it then undergoes a hard tonal shift, treating the player to the cute little sprites and *Peanuts*-esque art style. Sometime in the '90s, in the fictionalised United States known as Eagleland, a young boy named Ness is awoken in the middle of the night by the sound of a meteorite crashing to earth. Upon investigating it, Ness is spoken to by a small, insectoid creature named Buzz Buzz, who tells how he came from the future, where the Universal Cosmic Destroyer Giygas has laid waste to everything, hinting that this is what you saw in the game's opening sequence. Buzz Buzz provides Ness with a stone that records melodies before being set upon by an assassin intent on stopping them before they begin. Triumphing over this threat, only for Ness' terrible neighbour to mistake Buzz Buzz for a dung beetle and strike him dead, Ness is left alone to begin his quest to stop an alien invasion. Over the course of the adventure, Ness will be aided by a psychically gifted girl named Paula, a brilliant boy named Jeff, and a prince of the Far East named Poo. Together they will contend with extra-cranky ladies, strange alien beings, and exploding trees.

While *EarthBound* shares structural features with *Mother*, it works independently and has improved on just about everything that the original game had to offer. The writing is wittier, the gags are sillier, the combat is better tuned, the pacing is far more even, the cast is colourful, and the set pieces are varied and memorable. Being completely unafraid to have a sense of humour and be just flat out goofy at points, in addition to having just plain weird situations, characters, and visuals, *EarthBound* cements itself as an unforgettable experience.

Retaining the romanticised American aesthetic setting from *Mother*, *EarthBound* continues to use baseball bats instead of swords, psychic powers instead of magic, and department stores instead of weapon shops. This is taken still further, as many set pieces revolve around the kinds of things one can expect to find in a US town or city



•Master Belch grabbed
the "Fly Honey"!

EARTHBOUND

The retail price of *EarthBound* in the United States was $69.95, which was expensive, but on a par with, if not cheaper than, Square RPGs like *Final Fantasy III*. It also included a huge box and a strategy guide.

in the '90s, such as arcades, theatres, museums, cultist communes, and corporate skyscrapers. Later parts of the game, however, travel more widely, including to romanticised interpretations of Asia, Africa and Europe, with a special guest appearance by the Loch Ness Monster.

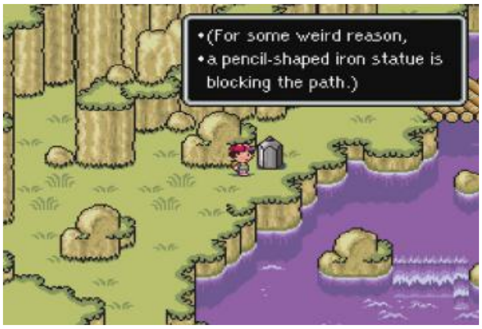
Mechanically, *EarthBound* maintains its basic *Dragon Quest* roots, as did *Mother*, combat takes place over turns in which your party will queue up actions and then play them all out in sequence. New to combat, however, are several points of distinction. Enemies are visible within the world and must make contact with Ness and crew to instigate combat, so encounters are no longer random. As you can see approaching enemies, you can now make surprise attacks from behind, though enemies can do this to you, too. In addition to this, should the party be sufficiently powerful, the game will simply declare, "YOU WIN!" and provide the proper rewards, instead of forcing a tedious combat engagement.

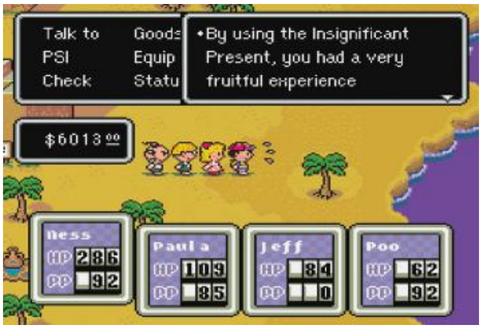
Within combat, the battle backgrounds are filled with what are now iconic psychedelic backdrops featuring constantly-moving shapes, colours, and patterns. Finally, the party has the advantage of the Rolling HP Meter. Whenever a character takes damage, rather than simple subtraction occurring instantly, the numbers instead tick down in real-time. Should a combat end mid-tick, the meter stops, and the character doesn't lose all the points they were hit for. In the event a character is dealt fatal damage, but someone heals them before it ticks down to 0 and declares them dead, they will survive with the amount they had left at the moment of healing. Many enemies in *Mother* explode, or emit powerful, party-wide damage effects, when they die, which wears the team down mercilessly. In *EarthBound*, many enemies still do this, but the Rolling HP Meter makes them more survivable, while adding tension instead of tedium.

EarthBound is a far more fun and approachable game, helped by using a localisation that was explicitly allowed to be as funny and weird as possible, in order to appeal to Western audiences, rather than a more direct and literal translation. The game also came packaged in an enormous cardboard box, featuring an elaborate strategy guide, and filled with charming clay models. Despite all of this work, *EarthBound* was considered a financial failure, and at least some of that has been attributed to its bizarre "THIS GAME STINKS" scratch-and-sniff magazine advertisements, which didn't really convey what the game was about. It didn't help that audiences in the West at the time didn't quite grasp the game, and neither did reviewers, who complained that it looked childish. Ness was available as a playable character in *Super Smash Bros.*, sparking curiosity as to just what *EarthBound* was, and finally bringing the West's attention to it. It was eventually re-released on the Wii U Virtual Console and included on the SNES Classic mini console. Over the years it came to inspire many other games, which imitated its cute sprites, colourful visuals, and solid music, its emphasis on love, and its theme of contention with an ever-present, lingering darkness that few can perceive.

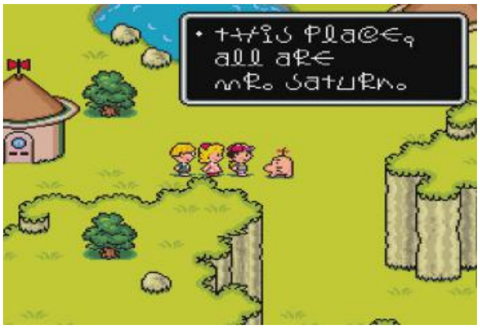
MOTHER
2
Nintendo
スーパーファミコン

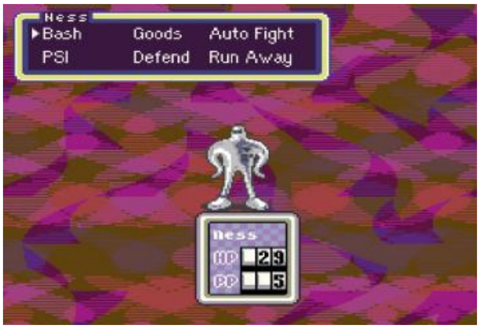
The minimalist cover of the Japanese *Mother* games indicates how little effort was required from Nintendo to sell this game in Japan, compared to the uphill battle it faced in North America.


•(For some weird reason,
•a pencil-shaped iron statue is blocking the path.)



•By using the Insignificant Present, you had a very fruitful experience


• this place, all are mr. saturn.



Among the many interesting characters you meet in *EarthBound*, few are so weirdly charming as Mr. Saturn, a race of people who are walking heads with large noses, and talk in a squiggly font.

Mother 3

Developer: Nintendo/Brownie Brown | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): GBA

16 HITS
TOTAL DAMAGE 16
Lucas
HP 110
PP 61
Boney
HP 78
PP 0

The Japanese live-action television advertisement for *Mother* featured music from the vocal album and real children awkwardly re-enacting the ending to the game. The American magazine advertisement for *EarthBound* involved strange scratch-and-sniff cards that smelled mighty unpleasant, intended to highlight the weirdness of the game. Both campaigns involved a general lack of understanding of what the games were really about; close, perhaps, but distinctly off. In 2006, we instead saw a humble commercial featuring a woman describing her emotional response to the strange, funny, and heartrending *Mother 3*.

A third *Mother* game was initially planned for the SNES in 1994, the power of the upcoming Nintendo 64 suggesting to the team that a stronger machine would allow them to develop in a 3D environment with fewer limitations. The reality of the development situation required them to put their efforts into a game for the ill-fated Nintendo 64 Disk Drive. When the platform was cancelled in the year 2000, it became clear that their vision for *Mother 3* couldn't be reasonably realised. It would be three more years before the game would resurface, and yet another three for it to see release on the Game Boy Advance, looking completely different from the original N64 prototype.

In a large departure from its predecessors, *Mother 3* does not open with an idealised facsimile of an American rural town or urban centre. Instead, it takes place in a little archipelago known as the Nowhere Islands, a play on the definition of the word "utopia", where you'll find the idyllic little village of Tazmily. On the outskirts of this humble, happy village lives a simple family. The mother took her children to visit their grandfather in the mountains while the father remained home to tend to the ranch. Strange shadows and odd music accompany the sunset as the day closes. Expecting his family home that evening, the father instead receives the dire news that the forest his family must travel through to return home is ablaze, the first inklings of grief to ever be forced upon this happy community.

While *Mother* was a strong narrative marred by inexperienced game design and tedious combat, and *EarthBound* was an immensely fun, silly game that didn't quite achieve the same degree of narrative depth, *Mother 3* takes the best elements of both and ties them together, making for the strongest entry in the series. Making use of a chapter-based narrative structure, the lead is passed from person to person, beginning with father of the family, Flint, before eventually settling on his son Lucas. Aiding them in their struggles are Duster the thief of justice, Kumatora the badass princess, Boney the family dog, and others. Their journeys will take them from forests filled with bizarre creatures to haunted castles, golem factories, and the capital of decadence, New Pork City, all while occasionally consulting the local frog to save the game.

Over a decade and a half after its Japanese release, English speaking fans are still begging Nintendo to release *Mother 3* in English. Will the company ever relent?

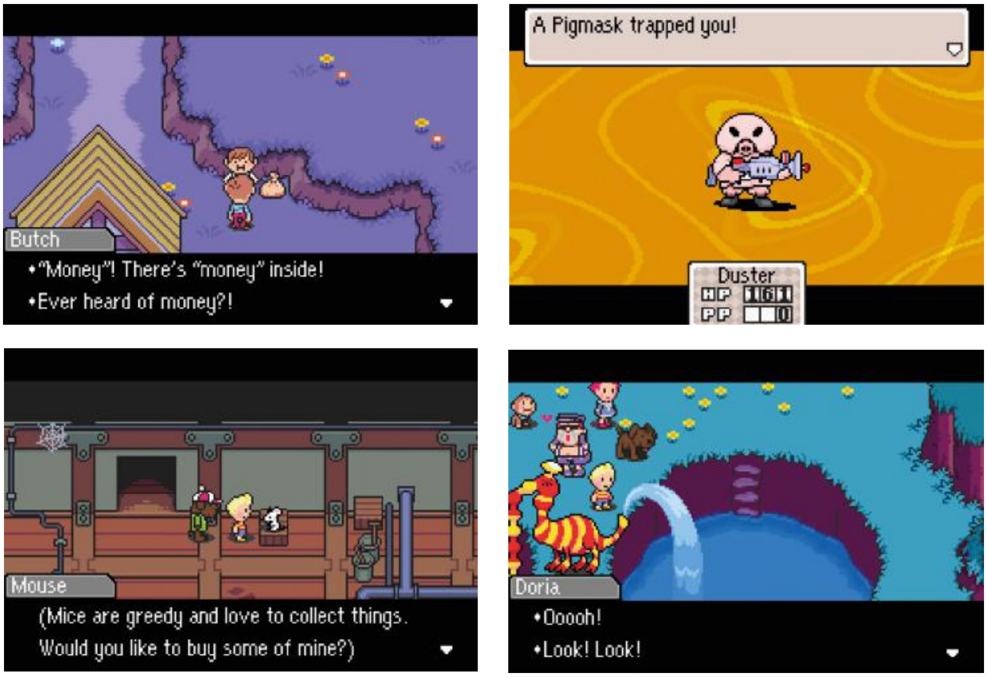
Finally stepping away from its *Dragon Quest* roots, *Mother 3* uses the mechanics of *EarthBound*'s Rolling HP Meter, while also introducing the Musical Combat System. Every enemy group has a "heartbeat" that matches the rhythm of the battle music. Whenever the player instructs a character to attack, pressing the button in time with this heartbeat will chain additional hits upon the subject. The game, however, remains well balanced, and treats this as a bonus rather than a necessity. Sufficient options are provided to allow those unable or uninterested in doing so to make their way through the game at their own pace.

However, as expected, the real draw is the writing. *Mother 3* explores ideas concerning the human condition, touching on themes of love, loss, consumerism, corruption, and the unchecked march of progress coupled with the unethical treatment of both flora and fauna. The game covers a span of years and observes how various people respond as the world around them changes, some for the better, and some for the worse. These changes fill the reader with encroaching feelings of dread and anxiety, yet *Mother 3* never fails to highlight the small moments of joy and hope that help people make it through the day and look forward to tomorrow. Simultaneously, it encourages the player to do what they can, when they can, to make the world a better place.

The emotional maturity of the game is comparable to few others, with critical reception claiming that *Mother 3* is the closest video games have ever come to literature. While *Mother* and *EarthBound* had their own troubled development histories, each ultimately saw initial release both domestically in Japan and then later internationally. *Mother 3*, however, has achieved nearly legendary status for its developmental woes. Which, at the time of this writing, despite a petition of 100,000 unique signatures requesting localisation, has yet to achieve international release, with no hint of change on the horizon. The reasons for this are many, including the game's depictions of drug use and animal cruelty. It's also suspected that the Magypsies, characters that are strongly coded as transgender, are another reason for hesitancy about localisation.

In 2008, a fan-translation patch was made for *Mother 3*, the effort headed by Clyde "Tomato" Mandelin of Legends of Localization. This not only translated the text, but also adjusted many visual points and gags to make them consistent with their original presentation in *EarthBound*. The scope and passion of the project are nearly as renowned as the game itself, a testament to the strong feelings evoked by the series.

Mother 3 is one of the greatest games ever made and even those not particularly interested in JRPGs should be encouraged to experience it for themselves. Much like its predecessors, it has done its part to inspire. While the series was a commercial and critical success, Shigesato Itoi has expressed no interest in continuing with it, stating instead that he is more interested in seeing what others will do, seemingly a nod of acknowledgement to those who would carry that inspiration into the future, and make games with thought, depth and consideration.



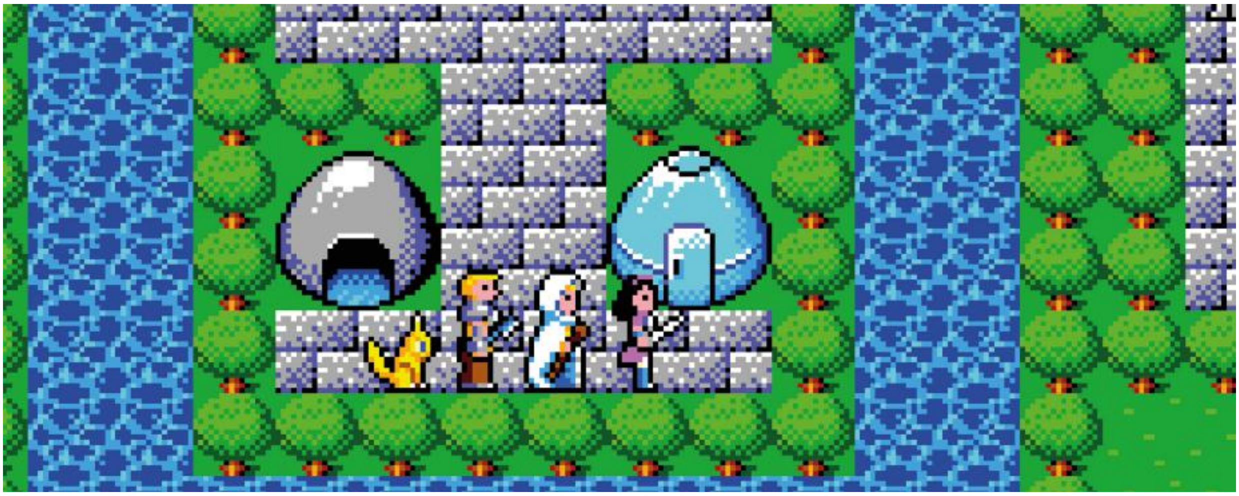
Butch
•"Money"! There's "money" inside!
•Ever heard of money?!

A Pigmask trapped you!

Mouse
(Mice are greedy and love to collect things.
Would you like to buy some of mine?)

Doria
•Ooooh!
•Look! Look!

***Mother 3* sees the return of a particularly obnoxious character from the second game, though due to some translation differences, it might not be immediately apparent.**



Phantasy Star

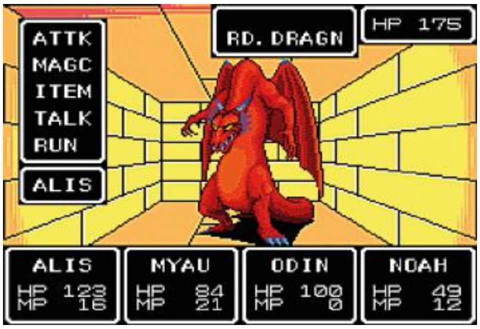
Developer: SEGA | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): SMS, PS2, NSW

SEGA's first attempts at RPGs were PC ports like *The Black Onyx* and *Miracle Warriors,* but with *Phantasy Star,* they crafted their first original example, one that could not only go toe-to-toe with better-known Famicom games, but also show off the technical superiority of the Master System. The development team included programmer Yuji Naka, later known as part of Sonic Team; musician Tokuhiko Uwabo, a regular on many Master System titles; and artist Rieko Kodama, who would later produce many RPGs at SEGA.

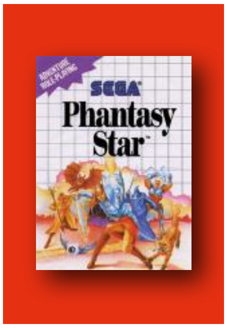
The game impresses right from the title screen and prologue. Nero, a political dissident, has been murdered by the evil king Lassic, leaving his sister Alis to avenge his death. Fairly early on, she meets three companions – the talking cat Myau, the wizard Noah, and the warrior Odin – who help her to take down the evil monarch. Female representation was rare at the time, and when it did happen, women were either presented so as to be attractive to men (wearing bikini armour and so forth) or relegated to secondary roles. Here, Alis is unashamedly the hero, and is dressed quite practically.

The world of *Phantasy Star* leaves behind common medieval fantasy tropes in favour of something more futuristic, with influence from *Star Wars.* Characters wield swords and magic spells, but also guns. The series focuses on the planets of the Algol star system – the desert world of Motavia, the temperate world of Palma, and the ice world of Dezoris.

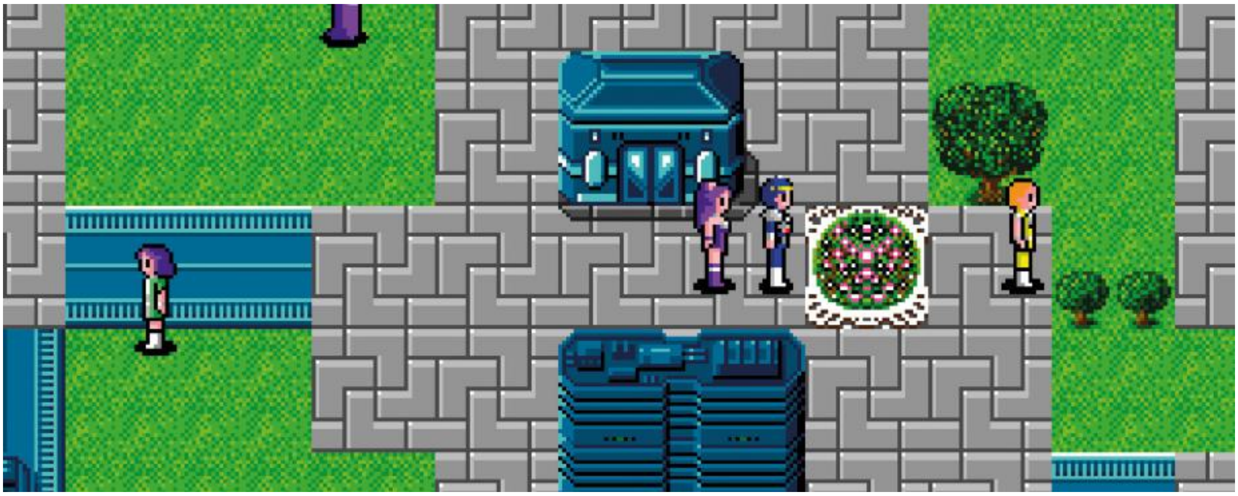
But beyond its scale, *Phantasy Star* is easily one of the most graphically impressive RPGs of its time, using a four megabit ROM cartridge. When talking to NPCs or entering shops, the viewpoint switches to a first-person perspective, giving you an up-close-and-personal view of not only the character but their surroundings. The same happens during combat, which is pretty typical of the genre – but in contrast to, say, *Dragon Quest,* where the enemies are static sprites against generic backgrounds, here, each backdrop is themed to match the terrain, and the enemies are fully animated (though only one type of bad guy is fought at a time and multiple foes are only represented by numbers). The dungeons are also displayed from a first-person perspective, with relatively smooth scrolling replacing the block-based movement typical of other games. These visuals are full screen, and look brilliant, due to both the art style and the bright colour palette of the Master System,



A 2002 remake for the PlayStation 2, as part of the *SEGA Ages 2500* line, gives it a total makeover, including extra quests and dialogue. However, while the graphics are higher resolution and more colourful, they lack the charm of the 8-bit original, and the soundtrack is quite poor. Perhaps because it required too much translation work, it was released only in Japan. The 2018 Switch version is an emulation of the Master System game but includes assorted balance tweaks, as well as automapping for the dungeons, making it easier for modern gamers to enjoy.



***Phantasy Star* is easily not only the best-looking 8-bit RPG, but one of the most visually incredible titles of the '80s.**



Phantasy Star II

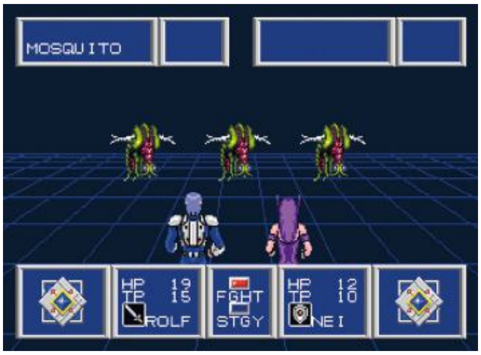
Developer: SEGA | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): GEN, PS2

Phantasy Star II initially began development on the Master System, but when SEGA pulled the plug on the system in Japan, it was shifted to the then brand-new Mega Drive/Genesis. Together with an expanded ROM size of six megabits, the 16-bit platform allowed for an even grander adventure.

The story takes place several centuries into the future, as a young man named Rolf has dreams of a woman named Alis fighting the evil Dark Force, the ultimate enemy from the original game. He awakens in his apartment, where he then begins his duties – the planets of the Algol system are now terraformed, but the main Mother Brain climate control system has gone haywire, causing a flood of monsters throughout the realm. Rolf, along with his pointy-eared companion Nei, sets out to investigate the cause.

The scale of the adventure has been expanded – while most of the game takes place on Motavia, due to the number and length of the dungeons, it's a much longer game. It also amps up the drama – one of the main characters gets killed early on, and one of the planets is completely destroyed. There are now eight playable characters with various skills, including Amy, a doctor; Shir, a thief; Hugh, a biologist; and Rudo and Anna, two brands of hunter. The combat scenes now allow for fights with multiple enemy types, with an Auto-Combat function to speed up battles.

However, several other elements have been scaled back. The dungeons are no longer first-person; NPCs no longer get their own separate conversation screen. The characters now appear on the battlefield, shown from an over-the-shoulder perspective as they attack enemies, but every background is the same generic blue grid, and the enemies are no longer as big nor as impressively animated. It also suffers from the worst elements of this class of RPG – the random encounters are numerous, the dungeons are exasperating, and while the story has a number of great twists, they're thinly spread as you trudge through those multiple, extremely similar dungeons. In an interview with the developers, these gruelling affairs were attributed to a rookie staff member who got a little carried away.



GENESIS
PHANTASY STAR II
16-BIT CARTRIDGE

***Phantasy Star II* ditches the first-person dungeons, but replaces them with sprawling labyrinths that are far more sinister.**

These are only issues in a modern context. At the time of its release, its quality was recognised by the magazine *Video Games and Computer Entertainment*, who nominated it the Best Game of 1990. Indeed, it's more impressive than the NES games that were being localised at the time.

The English and Japanese versions of *Phantasy Star II* use different drum samples in the soundtrack. Plus, like its predecessor, it got a PlayStation 2 remake that was released in Japan under the *SEGA Ages 2500* line, but the visuals look cheap, even though they added proper battle backgrounds. Other than adding an unnecessary system that lets you adjust your attack strength, it does nothing to adjust the difficulty, so those that want to play it should just stick with the original.

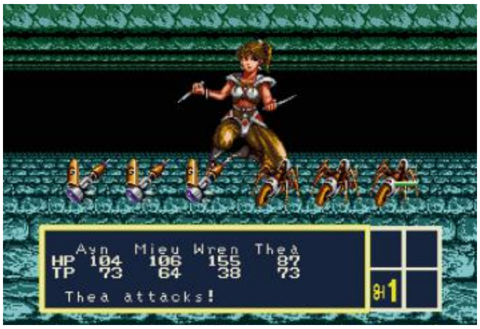
Phantasy Star III

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): GEN

Phantasy Star III: Generations of Doom begins on the wedding day of Prince Rhys of Orakio, which is summarily ruined when his wife-to-be Maia is kidnapped by a demon from the enemy kingdom of Laya. Rhys swears vengeance, and eventually rescues her. However, the player is then presented with a key decision – will Rhys still marry Maia, or will he instead get together with Lena, another princess who joined him on his journey? That decision will determine who their offspring, the stars of the next scenario, will be, roughly 20 years down the line. Once this second stage is completed, the hero is again presented with a choice of heroines to marry, again creating a new protagonist; this third generation will finally defeat the evil Dark Force.

This narrative conceit at the centre of *Phantasy Star III* is pretty interesting … but it doesn't make up for the fact that it barely feels like a *Phantasy Star* game. At the outset, it looks to be set in a medieval fantasy world, but then you hit the overworld and find a woman who calls herself a cyborg just waiting by the lake for you. As you adventure further, you find futuristic-looking caves, and some of the bad guys are mechanised. It's eventually revealed that you're actually on a spaceship containing seven different biodomes, so indeed there are some sci-fi elements in the story. But they're barely present, and the story is so loosely connected to the previous games', that the whole thing feels more like a side story than anything else.

The battle system has returned to a first-person view, though individual backgrounds replace the generic blue grid from *Phantasy Star II*, and five characters can participate at once. But these look strange in motion, as foes are poorly animated, often just waving a single limb at you, and just kinda fall behind the scenery when they die. The UI is geared even more heavily towards auto-battle, and issuing individual commands is a huge pain. Everything about it just looks and feels bizarre. The soundtrack, at least, is notable. While sometimes shrill, the music is pretty good, and used in interesting ways. While you're in the overworld, it sounds simple at first, but as you add more party members, more tracks are added, eventually creating a majestic theme; the battle theme changes mid-fight depending on how well the encounter is going for you.

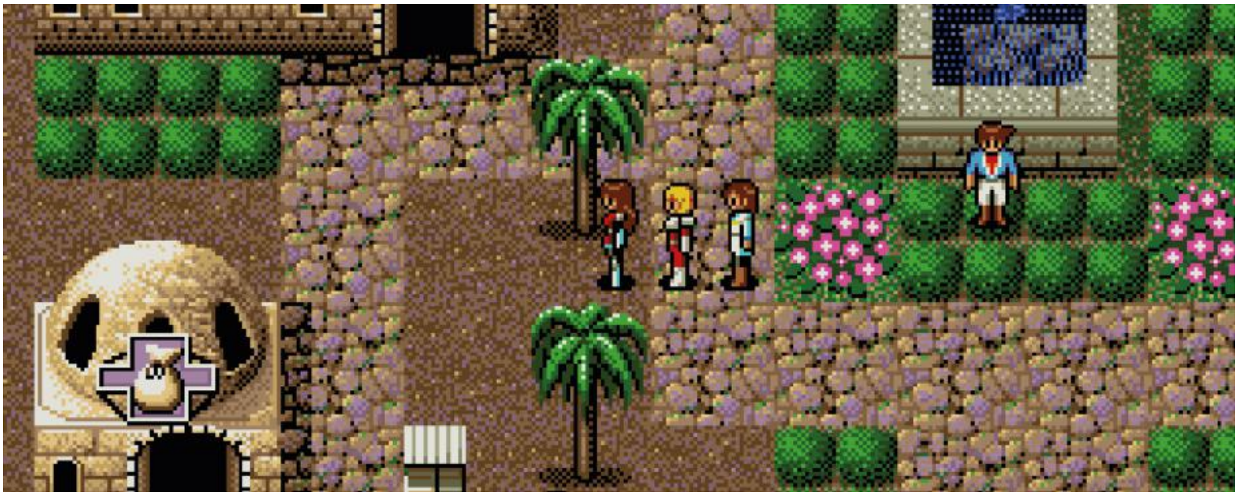


```
   Ayn  Mieu Wren Thea
HP 104  106  155   87
TP  73   64   38   73
 Thea attacks!
```

SEGA
GENESIS
PHANTASY STAR III
GENERATIONS OF DOOM

Phantasy Star III is the black sheep of the series, and not only because of its loose connections. Even considered separately, it's a weird, barely functional, halfway nonsensical mess. The concept of multi-generational heroes is fantastic, but neither the heroes nor the scenarios change enough to make it worth playing multiple times. Enix's *Dragon Quest V* used a similar idea a few years later, though with drastically different (and better) execution. The only real addition this game provides to the series' canon is the addition of cute bird enemies called Rappies (Chirpers in the English version), which became common foes in the later *Phantasy Star Online* series.

***Phantasy Star III* certainly features some absolutely puzzling enemy designs.**

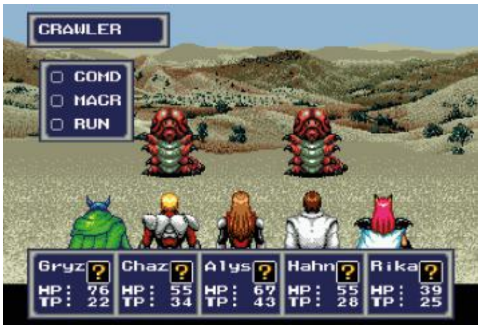


Phantasy Star IV

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): GEN

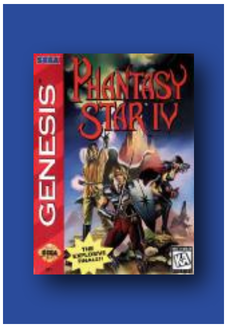
While *Phantasy Star II* was technically a 16-bit game, in many ways it was still rooted in 8-bit RPG design. Just over four years later, SEGA released *Phantasy Star IV*, and it's astounding how far the genre had advanced in that short period. The story is fairly similar – there's a monster outbreak, linked to various environmental factors, and mercenaries Alys and Chaz lead the investigation to discover what's behind it all. The story and its developments are relatively predictable, but the game plays to the series' strengths while mitigating nearly all of its faults.

For starters, it's a speedy game. The party walks at a good pace, battles begin in a flash, fight animations are fast, and encounters are resolved quickly. While the fights work similarly to those in *Phantasy Star II* (though utilising five characters and actual backgrounds), hidden combo attacks are released when certain characters use specific spells, which can be easily programmed using a macro system. The story moves along at a brisk pace, sending you quickly from scenario to scenario, and while some may miss the crushing difficulty level of the olden days, frankly it's nice to be able to explore dungeons without having to grind for hours just to get anywhere. The visual design is still excellent, with a colourful early '90s anime sci-fi style rarely seen in RPGs of the era, this time bolstered by comic book-style panels during key events, and the soundtrack is excellent as usual. The ROM size is 24 Mb, substantially larger than most other games on the Genesis, and closer to the size as most of the SNES' more popular later-gen RPGs. (That's also why it retailed for 100 USD.)



It was also the last "true" *Phantasy Star* game, and does its best to not only wrap everything up but also act as a tribute to everything before it. Most of the game involves exploring the same planets as the first two games, but after 1000 years have passed, so they've evolved substantially (plus one was blown up and is basically just a cluster of debris). The first game used some of its unique races only as NPCs, but each race now contributes a main crew member. There's an elf-like character much like Nei, two cyborgs reminiscent of those in *Phantasy Star III*, and one character is a reincarnation of Noah from the first game. Even King Lassic comes back for another round of combat. Some of the references do get mangled, thanks to some inconsistent localisations over the course of the series, but the writing itself is otherwise pretty decent for a 16-bit RPG. Despite the many homages to the previous games, it's not really necessary to have played them, as the story stands on its own fairly well. While the Genesis was never remotely the RPG powerhouse that the SNES was, this entry stands as not only the best on the platform, but easily hangs up with the rest of the 16-bit greats.

The *Phantasy Star* series slept through the 32-bit era but was reborn on the Dreamcast as *Phantasy Star Online*, an MMORPG that borrowed some of the style and terminology of the classic games, though not much else.



The US version of *Phantasy Star IV* features a cover by fantasy artist Boris Vallejo. It's nice art, but like most localised work, it bears little resemblance to the game it's patterned after. The Roman numeral "IV" was also added for overseas release.

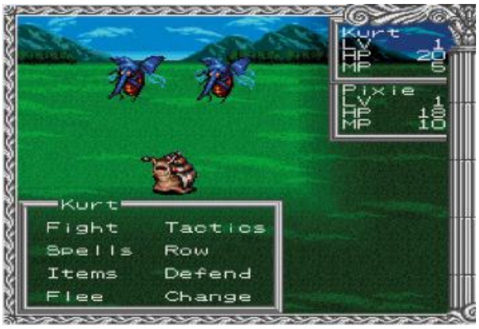
Heracles no Eikou (series)

Developer: Data East | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): FC, SFC, GB, DS

Data East was a company largely known for offbeat arcade games like *Karnov* and *Bad Dudes,* but like many Famicom publishers, its developers also tried their hands at RPG development. Their first series was *Heracles no Eikou* ("The Glory of Heracles"), which features a world influenced by Greek mythology.

Like many early Famicom RPGs, the first game in the series, subtitled *Toujin Makyouden* ("Story of the Underworld Fighter"), is heavily based on *Dragon Quest*. You play as Heracles, with a quest based on his 12 labours, as he rescues the kidnapped goddess Venus from Hades. Fights are one-on-one, and each enemy type has one of three different attributes (land, sea, or air), affecting which weapons work best against each type. Weapons also degrade with use and must be taken to a blacksmith to be repaired. There are some unique aspects, as the towns are laid out directly on the world map rather than being separate areas. You can talk to bosses in battle, and even use items to read their inner thoughts. Combat text also includes battle cries from Heracles, which make the fights feel a little less dry. However, Data East had a reputation for weird, kinda janky titles and this game definitely qualifies. The balance is terrible and the programming is incredibly glitchy, especially when it comes to password entry or messing with the random number generators. So while it's an interesting first effort, it's just not very good.

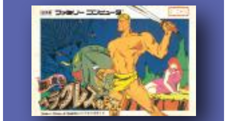
The second game, *Titan no Metsubou* ("The Downfall of the Titans"), is a marked improvement. It looks and feels closer to *Dragon Quest II,* with the inclusion of multiple playable characters and a day/night cycle, though some of the more innovative elements of its predecessor, like the towns being on the world map and the mid-battle chats, have been abolished. The biggest improvement is the story, due in no small part to writer Kazushige Nojima. He had previously worked on Data East's *Tantei Jinguuji Saburou* (later known in English as *Jake Hunter*) adventure games, and from this point on was tied into this series. (In 1994, he joined Squaresoft and worked on many *Final Fantasy* titles.) Here, Heracles is not the hero but rather a supporting character; instead the protagonist is a young boy sent to defeat one of the Titans offspring, while meeting up with various folks from Greek mythology. It's nothing special, but it is a vast improvement over its predecessor, and helped form the baseline for the series.



A spinoff game was also released for the Game Boy, subtitled *Ugokidashita Kamigami* ("The Gods Began to Move"): *The Snap Story*. The story here corrects some inconsistencies between the first and second games. Again, you play as Heracles, in a quest to defeat another demon king, though this time you are joined by various gods and goddesses including Ares, Persephone, Artemis, Hermes, Apollon, and more. Only one can join you at a time, though.

The screenshots on this page are from the third *Heracles* game of the series, for the Super Famicom.

▶たたかう
どうぐ
ぶき
はなす
にげる
HP 9
もっていない 0
もっていない 0
もっていない 0
G 474



It's in the third entry, *Kamigami no Chinmoku* ("Silence of the Gods"), that the *Heracles* series really hits its stride. You control a warrior who wakes with a seemingly immortal body but absolutely no memory. Worse, earthquakes have begun creating holes to the underworld, creating chaos across the land. During his adventuring, you meet more immortals, who also have amnesia. Together, you must piece together their true roles, and relationships to the plagues of the land, and discover why the gods of Olympus have seemingly abandoned humanity.

While some may grow weary of amnesiac heroes, as they are exceedingly common across all types of story, this is one of the first JRPGs to include this trope, and it pulls it off extremely well, paving the way for later, better-known games like Bioware's *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and Mistwalker's *Lost Odyssey*. There are lots of clues that might raise questions, but once the shocking truth of the main characters is learned, everything falls into place.

Fundamentally, the game still looks and plays like *Dragon Quest*, but some aspects have a more unique voice, such as learning new spells by visiting various temples around the game world. Since your heroes are immortal, they show off their strength by leaping from cliffs, impressing those with lesser constitutions. (You also regularly hop in and out of the underworld.) There's a trust stat, showing how much your compatriots like you, which goes down if you steal stuff from people's houses, and may cause them to refuse orders in combat. You can also escort NPCs, who join you in combat, though they're obviously much weaker than the core characters. The only real downside lies in its off-kilter difficulty, in no small part due to the enemy level scaling with your own, and some particularly brutal boss fights.

In the fourth game, *Kamigami kara no Okurimono* ("Gift from the Gods"), the hero is a young man in the city of Atlantis, which has fallen under attack by the Greeks. During their escape, he and his friends unwittingly open Pandora's box, unleashing terrors on the rest of the world. In the meantime, they fall asleep for several millennia; the protagonist eventually wakes up, finding himself without a proper body. Instead, to start off with, you inhabit a dog, but there are about 100 NPCs that you can temporarily possess, each with its own abilities. Each also has a fitness level, which is improved through fighting and, at the right level, enables them to learn new skills. Beyond combat, other characters react to you differently – obviously they'll treat the king differently from a mere canine. (It is amusing the way that shopkeepers admit that it's pretty weird to be selling weapons to a dog but they don't really care as long as you can pay them.) As you progress through the game, you rejoin with Plato and Epipha, your friends from Atlantis, to discover why their city was invaded, and attempt to set everything right with the world.

The visuals have improved over its predecessor, and the music is excellent, thanks to composer Shogo Sakai, later of *Mother 3*. The balance is not really a problem anymore, either, though the game is a little on the short side. While some prefer the tragic story of the third game, this scenario is still very good, and overall, this is probably the best entry in the series.

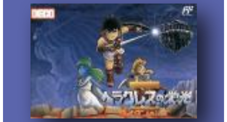
Data East shifted away from RPGs after the 16-bit era, and eventually found themselves in financial difficulties in the early 2000s, leading to their bankruptcy. Its staff and properties went in

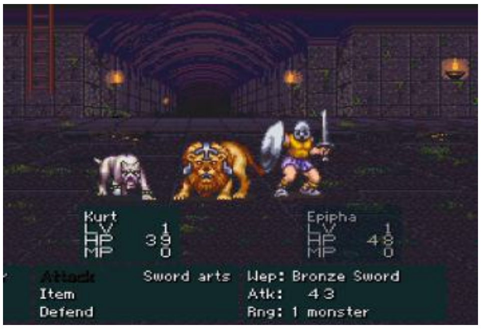
The rather poor artwork for the first *Heracles no Eikou* game appears to have been made by tracing over an old Superman comic.

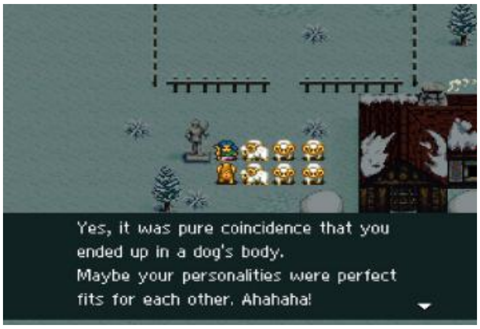
Heracles goes anime with the second Famicom game, a big improvement over the first.

コマンド
➜はなす
まほう
そうび
もちもの
つよさ
しらべる

★「ここを　とおすわけにはいかぬ。






Yes, it was pure coincidence that you ended up in a dog's body. Maybe your personalities were perfect fits for each other. Ahahaha!

The story in *Heracles no Eikou IV*, pictured here with the English fan translation, isn't quite as good as its predecessor's, but it's overall a better game.

different directions, with the *Heracles* games going to a company called Paon. Together with Studio Saizensen (later known for *Code of Princess* and *Sayonara Umihawa Kawase*) and Nintendo, they resurrected the series in 2008 with a new entry, lacking a numeral but subtitled *Tamashii no Shoumei* ("Proof of the Soul"). They also brought back Kazushige Nojima, now a freelancer, as the writer. This is the only game in the series to have been officially released in English.

This final entry in the series seems to acknowledge that the third entry had the best story, so this almost feels like a soft reboot using the same concept. The main character wakes up with no memory and a seemingly immortal body, meets up with fellow adventurers in similar situations, and they explore their surprising and twisted past. It definitely maintains elements of the older games, including the battle yells during the fight, party members admonishing you for stealing, and lots of places to leap from great heights without getting harmed.

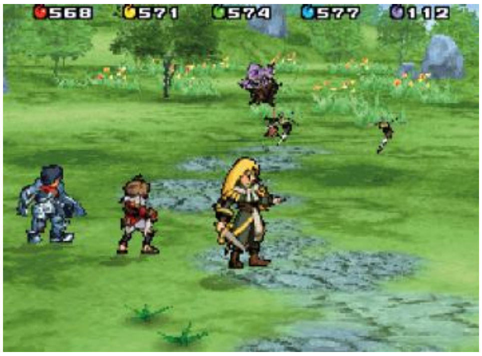
It also acknowledges that, as of its release in 2008, battles couldn't just keep ripping off *Dragon Quest*, so the perspective is changed from first- to third-person. There are front and back rows, as with the older games, but positioning plays a bigger role, offering various advantages like recharging MP if you're in the back. There are plenty of skills and abilities that can be activated or triggered too. While magic spells use MP, there's also a pool of element-related ether, shared among both friends and foes. Available ether is needed to cast spells, or else you'll take damage, though you can increase ether by beating enemies into submission. While a lot of work was put into the design, in reality, it's just very slow, particularly the spell effects, resulting in battles that drag on way too long. This was a major mark against the Japanese version, though fights were sped up a bit for the international release, including the ability to skip the touch-screen mini-games that charge up magic attacks. Even with this, fights are still slower than they should be.

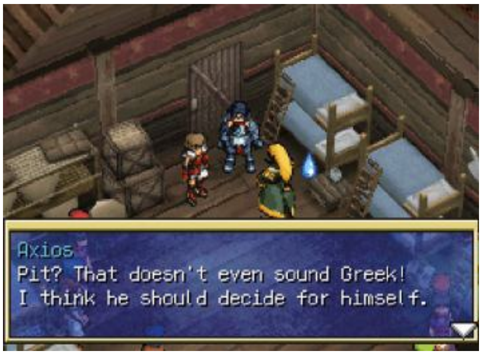
But it's not just the fighting: the overall pacing is slow. The opening hours drag, especially with the numerous tutorial messages. And thanks to all the extra dialogue, it feels so much slower than the 16-bit games. The actual story is pretty good, especially once the plot twists and revelations begin to happen, in the second half of the game, but what was progressive in the mid-'90s isn't quite as powerful in the late 2000s, and as a result, it doesn't have nearly the same impact.

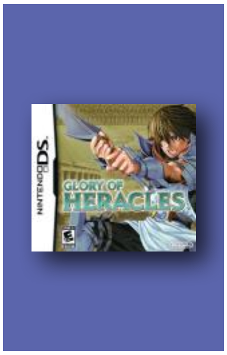
The backgrounds are 3D rendered, while the 2D sprites have a pre-rendered CG look that makes them seem kinda mushy. Tetsuhiko Kikuchi (a.k.a. Han), the graphic designer on many titles from legendary developer Treasure (*Gunstar Heroes*, *Guardian Heroes*), worked on the character sprites, but the low resolution makes it hard to see their details. The soundtrack, largely by Yoshitaka Hirota (*Shadow Hearts*) is decent, if not particularly memorable.

In the end, the game was not terribly well received: Japanese fans professed their preference for the 16-bit era, while English-speaking fans just considered it an alright RPG saddled with slow pacing. This buried the series once more, though the fan translations of the earlier titles in the series have helped spread awareness of their excellent quality among hardcore JRPG fans.

The English writing for the DS game sneaks in a clever jab at Nintendo's other Greek mythology-based series.




Axios
Pit? That doesn't even sound Greek!
I think he should decide for himself.



Metal Max (series)

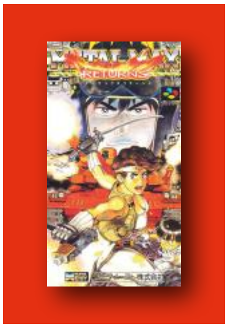
Developer: Crea-Tech | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): FC, SFC, GBA, PS2, DS, 3DS, PS4, PSV

Data East began its work on RPGs with the *Heracles no Eikou* series, which hewed pretty closely to the *Dragon Quest* formula. But another part of the company, later known as Crea-Tech, went in a slightly different direction with the *Metal Max* series. Inspired by *Mad Max* and taking place in a post-apocalyptic world where much of human civilisation has been wiped out by a maniacal computer called Noah, you control a monster hunter who seeks to make a name for themselves, and hopefully rake in the cash. Its tagline in Japan was "I'm tired of dragon killing!"

In the first game, initially released for the Famicom, you control a boy who aspires to leave behind the boredom of life as a mechanic and instead wants to hunt monsters. He's almost immediately disowned by his father (though he'll still begrudgingly help out at his shop) and left to explore the world on his own. Alas, the world is crawling with strange creatures, and walking around the wilderness on foot is a sure way to invite death. So one of the first things you need to do is find a tank, which is one of the key elements of the game. Much of your time is spent finding new tanks and customising them with various pieces of equipment and weapons. In most games in the series, you can't stack too much on there or you'll exceed its weight limit.

Tanks don't have typical HP, but rather armour plates (called SP or Special Points) that absorb damage; once these are depleted, then further attacks will destroy other pieces of onboard equipment until the tank becomes unusable, forcing the pilot to attack on foot. Generally, you're extremely vulnerable without a vehicle, though in some areas where your tank won't fit, you need to explore on foot anyway. Thankfully, vehicles can be repaired, so your tanks will never be completely lost. You do also have to worry about ammunition, so you need to both attack wisely and visit supply depots regularly. If you do end up getting wiped out, you'll be resurrected with no real penalty, but you'll need to revisit the location of your smashed vehicles if you want to recover them. Whenever you're wiped out, a scar is added to the status screen, which doesn't actually mean much but exists as a memorial to all of the times you've fallen.

The structure and narrative are a little more open-ended than in a typical JRPG, since at first, there's no real goal beyond just becoming a stronger monster hunter. Instead, you explore on your own, and take on contracts to hunt down wanted monsters or other villains. Many of these are optional sub-quests that you can do just for the rewards. You'll eventually gather a party of other characters of different classes, each with their own skills (the hero is a Hunter; others include Mechanic and Soldier), and amass a small army of customised tanks to roll with. However, at pretty much any point in the story, you can return home to your family and call quits on your monster-hunting days. This technically counts as



Visually *Metal Max*, resembles a post-apocalyptic *Final Fantasy*. Header picture is from *Metal Max 2*, box art and screen to the left from *Metal Max Returns*.

Skill
Main
Drive
Item
Sub
Defend
Ammo
S E
Flee

PlayStation 2
METAL SAGA

Atlus played up the anime side of the series for the American release of *Metal Saga.*

an ending, but only by following the game's main plot thread will you find the final boss and be rewarded with a proper finale.

The series also has a rather quirky sense of humour, which Data East games were known for. Since the *Metal Max* series is basically aimed at adolescents, it can't be too grim, despite the fact that much of human civilisation has been wiped out. Monsters tend to be weird anthropomorphic biological/mechanical hybrids, many of which are kind of silly, like the gas cans with legs or the hippo with a gigantic cannon in its mouth. Whenever you die, you're resurrected by a Dr. Frankenstein-type character named Dr. Minchi, who seems a little too excited about experimenting on corpses.

The first game was released at the end of the Famicom's lifespan, so it didn't make an enormous impact, but it was given another chance with a sequel, *Metal Max 2*, on the Super Famicom. This is pretty similar, but brings with it a number of enhancements enabled by the shift to the 16-bit platform. It obviously looks better, plus the battle system has been tweaked to allow different presentation modes – one of these has both sides exchanging blows simultaneously after selecting commands, which both looks cool and speeds up combat. Its music is also much improved too – as the title implies, the music has a heavy metal sound, something which the SNES' guitar samples were decent at replicating. One of the battle themes, used for encounters with "wanted" enemies in the Famicom version, has been reused in many subsequent entries in the series.

But the most distinctive (and silliest) aspect introduced in the second game is the addition of a canine companion. Although it can't ride vehicles, it can be equipped with absolutely ridiculous weapons – like strapping a rocket launcher to its back – and faithfully fights alongside your team. The story in this game involves hunting down the four Grappler Kings, including the maniacal Ted Broiler, who murders the hero's parents at the beginning of the game. He has huge lips and a mohawk, is equipped with flamethrowers, and proves himself to be quite a compelling villain. You're also given the option of getting married to one of the female characters, though this does end the game.

Metal Max 2 was followed up by *Metal Max Returns*, a remake of the Famicom game, upgraded to 16-bit level and including some additional content. There was also a Game Boy Advance port of the second game, called *Metal Max 2 Kai*, though it suffers from substantial issues, owing to a large number of bugs. At this point Data East was suffering significant financial problems, with a planned Dreamcast game called *Metal Max WILD Eyes* eventually getting cancelled.

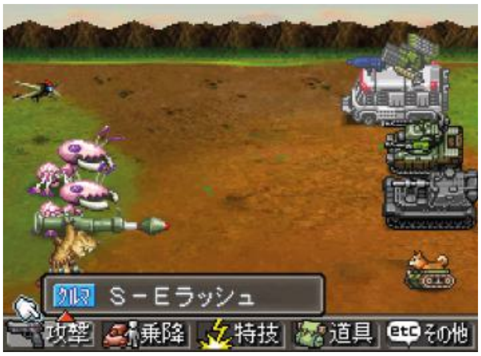
At this point, Crea-Tech staff joined up with the developer Success and wanted to continue the series, but due to those financial issues, it was unable to obtain the *Metal Max* name. So instead, they created their own series called *Metal Saga*, with two entries, for the PlayStation 2 and DS in 2005 and 2006, respectively. Make no mistake, these aren't spinoffs, and they're basically *Metal Max* sequels in everything but name.

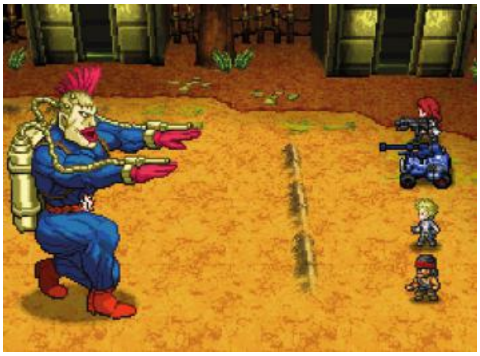
Metal Saga: Sajin no Kusari ("Chains of Dust") is the PlayStation 2 game, which brings the series into 3D. While this may have been necessary for the market, the low budget for the title shows, as it's not an attractive-looking game, and it's plagued by long load times and other technical issues. Nonetheless, it's pretty faithful to the previous games. Changes include the removal of the pure turn-based system, replaced by turns based on your machine's weight, and the ability to customise your party with a number of additional characters. The open-ended structure is still there, with even more freedom than in the older games, though this means that it's also more difficult and unbalanced. This was also the first game localised into English, released by Atlus, which keeps the somewhat silly tone of the series.

The DS entry, *Hagane no Kisetsu* ("The Season of Steel") keeps the 2D visuals but suffers from other, more severe, problems. While matching the older game in some ways, it's hamstrung by requiring stylus use for practically everything, and by its incredibly slow character movement and large number of bugs. Other changes are frustrating, like restricting you to only one tank at a time in battle (instead you can have two pilots) and having a more linear structure. It ended up being something of a flop.

The series was then rested until being revitalised in 2010, this time using the proper name and thus being dubbed *Metal Max 3*. Published by Kadokawa and developed by Cattle Call (another company consisting of ex-Data East staff), it's faithful to the look and feel of the

The box art for the second game emphasises its most important new element: your canine companion.





NINTENDO DS
METAL MAX 3

Screenshots from *Metal Max 2 Reloaded* pictured above left, and the cover art of *Metal Max 3* (above).

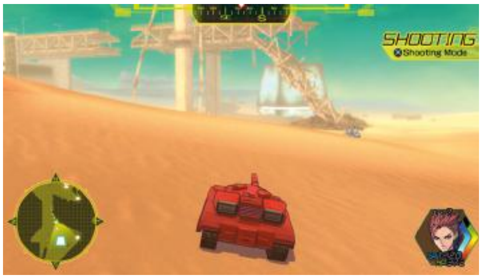
16-bit games without the issues that hindered the *Metal Saga* entries. The hero is an amnesiac resurrected by Dr. Minchi, initially called Drum Can (since that's the first object he sees). He begins to explore the world as a hunter, in hopes of understanding his forgotten identity. As in *Dragon Quest III*, you can create various party members to join your squad – in addition to the established Hunter, Mechanic, and Soldier classes, it introduces Nurse, Wrestler, and Artist jobs. You can also define their gender, between male, and female, and crossdresser. The visuals here use 2D sprites on 3D backgrounds, and they look pretty good, with some solid animations. The character artwork is by Masaki Hirooka, known for his work on *Castlevania: Order of Ecclesia* and *Advance Wars: Days of Ruins.*

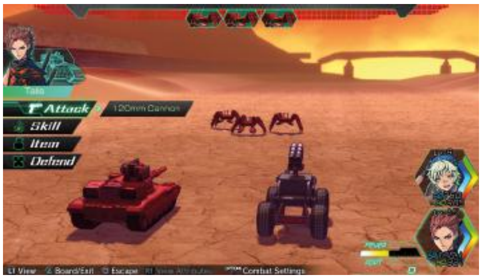
This was followed up with *Metal Max 2: Reloaded*, a remake of the second game using the new engine from the third. Though there are many other tweaks and additions, the biggest is that you can customise the protagonist, as you could the secondary characters from the third game, allowing you to choose your gender and class. It also allows subclasses for characters, creating hybrids. Altogether, it's an excellent remake.

A fourth game was released for the 3DS, subtitled *Gekkou no Diva* ("Diva of Moonlight"), this time moving the series fully into 3D and adding in voice acting. In addition to player-created characters, with two new classes, Rider and Dancer, there are plenty of story characters, plus you can recruit bears along with dogs. It also has a significant amount of DLC. Despite the fairly high quality of these DS and 3DS entries, none of them were picked up for localisation, which is a huge shame.

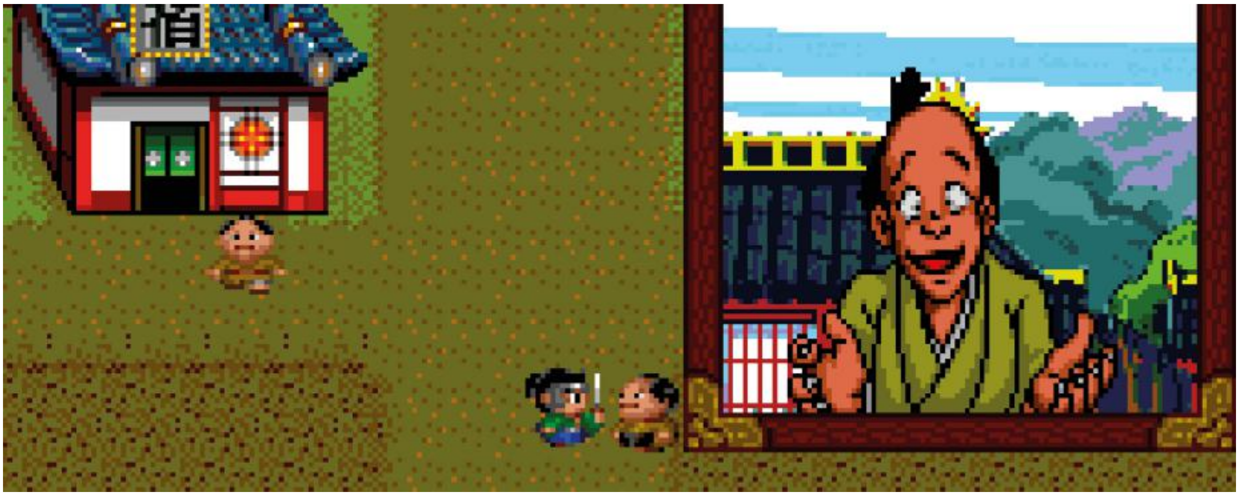
The most recent entry in the series is *Metal Max Xeno*, released in 2018. This is actually a soft reboot for the series, which has a remarkably different tone from that of previous entries. It eliminates many of the sillier elements in favour of a darker, more dire world, where humanity has been almost completely wiped out. The main character joins up with a small team, finds a tank, and begins hunting for the remnants of civilisation. They initially believe that humanity is doomed, since they're all men (except for a female robot, who obviously can't reproduce), though they do quickly discover a woman whom they believe to be the last female alive.

The crux of *Metal Max* – tank customisation and bounty hunting – is still in place, but it feels very stripped back. The previous games had standard RPG towns to visit, whereas this game is almost completely desolate outside of the main base. While this evokes a grim atmosphere, it also means that you spend most of your time just driving around wastelands. And although the colour scheme is actually quite pretty for a post-apocalyptic environment – green skies during the day, red in the evening – the rest has a low-budget look and feel. Everything else – customisable characters, tank-building elements, dungeon variety – are also scaled back or missing. And without its sense of humour, it feels like a large chunk of its personality is gone – there isn't a single dog to recruit anywhere! This game was localised into English by Nippon Ichi, and while it's not bad, it's hardly representative of the series' quality. A revamped version called *Metal Max Xeno: Reborn*, released in 2020, makes many tweaks, including the return of the dogs, thankfully.



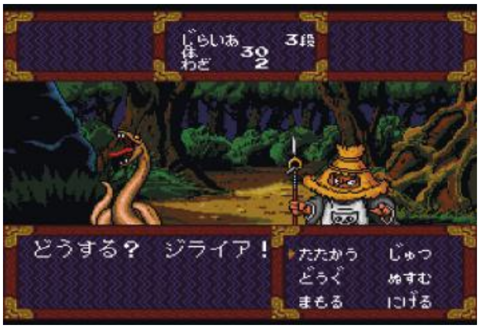


Metal Max Xeno isn't really representative of the best of this series, so it's unfortunate that this, rather than the superior DS and 3DS entries, was localised.



Tengai Makyou (series)

Developer: Hudson/Red Entertainment | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): PCECD, SFC, SAT, PSP and more



どうする？ ジライア！

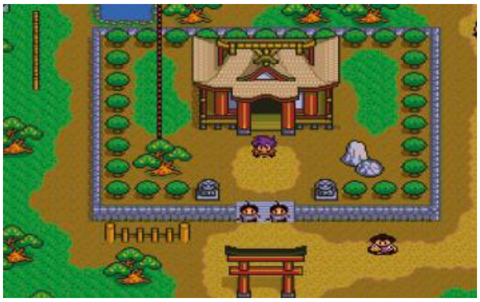
Released six months after the launch of the PC Engine CD, *Tengai Makyou: Ziria* was a killer app for the platform in Japan, along with *Ys Book I & II.*

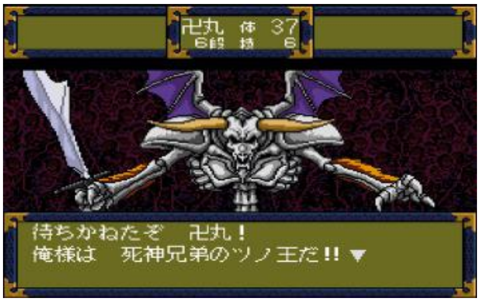
NEC was an early proponent of the CD-ROM, offering an attachment to its PC Engine console, released in late 1988 in Japan. Every piece of new technology needs a killer app to get it into homes, and for this platform, at least in its native country, that was Hudson's *Tengai Makyou: Ziria*. Developed in conjunction with Red Entertainment, a production company responsible for many popular video games produced in the '90s, it was largely the work of two writers: Ouji Hiroi and Shoji Masuda, both of whom went on to have quite interesting careers in the industry. The concept was kicking around production companies both as a live action film and an anime, until Hudson got involved and turned it into a video game.

"*Tengai Makyou*" directly translates as "The Demon's Dwelling Outside the Heavens", though its official English title (despite none of the main games ever having been released outside of Japan) is *Far East of Eden*. The framing narrative has the games based on a chronicle of the same name, written by a Western traveller and historian named P.H. Chada, who journeyed eastward and told exaggerated tales of the land he discovered. As such, the games present a distorted, generally goofy take on Japanese history and folklore. Nearly all of them take place in a land called Jipang, the same name given to the country by Italian traveller Marco Polo, whose works were obviously the basis for this concept.

The first game in the series is taken from the folktale *Jiraiya Gouketsu Monogatari*, which also provided elements for the popular shounen anime *Naruto*. A dark clan from outside the land, called the Daimon Cult, is set to resurrect the evil Masakado, so it's up to a boy named Ziria to travel the country and assemble his fellow members of the Fire Clan to take them down. His party includes Tsunade, a delinquent little girl who's actually quite tough, and Orochimaru, a serious warrior with goofy blue hair and a samurai 'tude. Though Ziria is largely a silent hero, the interplay between the others creates a comical atmosphere. Additionally, *Tengai Makyou* is one of the first RPG series to put a big emphasis on unique boss characters. There are 13 members of Daimon Cult, each with unique personalities, making them much more interesting than the typical JRPG baddies of the late '80s. The most popular is a ridiculous talking anthropomorphic monkey named Manto, who was so popular with fans that he reappeared in subsequent entries. Most of them have regular human forms, but make dramatic transformations into monsters when their battle goes down.

Going by any regular gameplay screenshot, *Tengai Makyou: Ziria* doesn't look all that impressive, with a level of detail only slightly above that of Famicom RPG. The main addition is digitised speech, and while much of the game is still text-only, there's still quite a bit of voice-over. There are occasional cutscenes (which look relatively simple compared to what came later,





待ちかねたぞ 卍丸！
俺様は 死神兄弟のツノ王だ!! ▼

***Tengai Makyou II: Manjimaru* includes an extensive opening cinematic sequence, which introduces the powers of its four main cast members.**

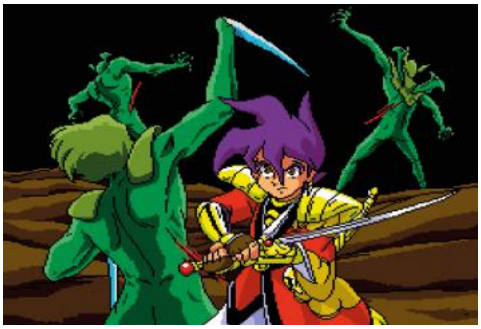
in the 16-bit CD era) and some NPCs have portraits, which make them a little more individual. A few tracks were provided by legendary composer Ryuichi Sakamoto, which are played as redbook audio, though the majority of the soundtrack is played via PSG and is rather unimpressive.

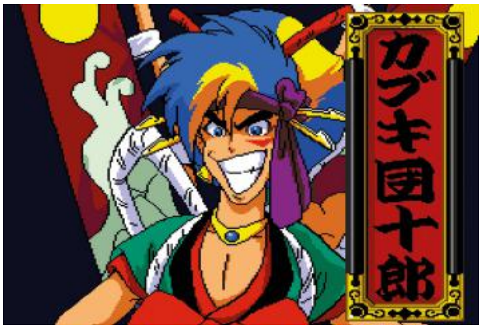
The other main benefit of the CD-ROM is purely storage space. PC Engine HuCards generally had a storage limit of a paltry four megabits, greatly limiting what they could do. In advertising the game, Hudson promised that it was 520 times the size of *Dragon Quest III*, and featured over 3,000 characters (most of which were generic NPCs, of course, but it's still impressive). Thus, the script was no longer constrained by ROM size, making for a larger, richer game. On the downside, there is quite a bit of loading, at least on standard consoles, though all emulated versions are sped up considerably. However, none of this changes the fact that it's still a fairly typical *Dragon Quest* clone: it's just a technologically advanced one with a more unique theme.

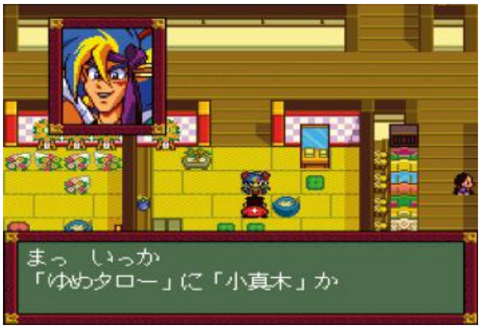
Technology moves at a rapid pace, and soon the 64 kb RAM expansion provided with the original PC Engine CD-ROM system was not enough. Just a few years after its introduction, the Super CD-ROM System Card was introduced, with extra RAM totalling 256 kb. Again, NEC needed something to help sell gamers on shelling out the extra money to upgrade, and of course, one of the big names was the second *Tengai Makyou* game, again subtitled for the protagonist, *Manjimaru*.

The evil Root Clan seeks to take over Jipang, this time wielding the power of plants, including a particularly vicious life-sucking orchid called the Dark Ran. The hero, part of the same Fire Tribe as Ziria, sets off to find companions and save the kingdom. Other party members include Gokuraku, a fire breathing giant who's over a thousand years old, and Kinu, a half-demon, half-human who travels with a big fluffy dog. But the breakout character is Kabuki Danjuurou, a loud and arrogant ladies' man, who is almost comically immoral in spite of technically being a good guy. The story gets quite a bit sillier, but there's also quite a bit of violence and adult humour that are somewhat uncharacteristic of early '90s JRPGs. It sure is funny, though some of it had to be toned down for subsequent re-releases, to avoid any problems with CERO, Japan's age rating organisation.

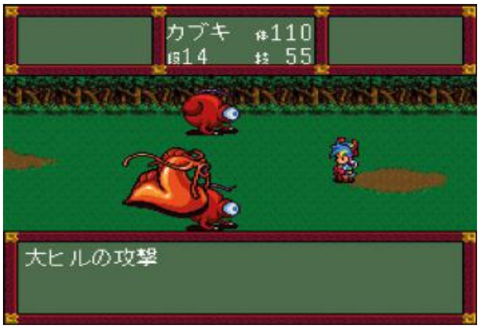
The improvement due to the extra RAM can be immediately seen in the introduction, which is much more vividly animated than anything in the first game. The main selling point was that there would be some kind of cutscene every 30 minutes of play, with an estimated 70 hours to finish the game. The in-game graphics have improved subtly, to the point where the characters now look like they come from a 16-bit *Final Fantasy* game rather than a *Dragon Quest* one. Regular battles are still pretty basic-looking, and take place on a black background (to reduce the need for constant loading). But the boss battles are particularly impressive, as each sprite takes up half the screen and is actually animated, unlike those in regular fights. The main themes were composed by Joe Hisaishi, mostly known for his Ghibli film work, and his tracks are excellent, though as in its predecessor, most tracks are played via PSG. This all comes together to create a game that's regarded by Japanese fans as the best of the series. The game saw a 3D remake for the PlayStation 2 and GameCube, though it's rather ugly and load times are long. A better conversion was released for the DS, which includes the ability to charge up your attacks with the touch screen.







まっ　いっか
「ゆめタロー」に「小真木」か



大ヒルの攻撃

After this, in 1993, Hudson decided to create a spinoff subtitled *Fuuun Kabukiden* (“A Turbulent Kabuki Story”), naturally starring Kabuki. The game begins in Kyoto; the women of the city have been whisked away by a splinter cell of the Daimon Cult. However, Kabuki’s adventures eventually send him right around the world, to London, England. Amusingly, the interface also changes when you travel – while in Japan, stats are displayed with Japanese kanji, while they change to English text later on. While the rest of the main cast is new, characters from both *Ziria and Manjimaru* also make appearances. Given Kabuki’s profession as a stage actor, there’s also a number of vocal songs. Gameplay-wise, it’s mostly the same as before, though fights are viewed from a side-on perspective, making it look even more like *Final Fantasy*.

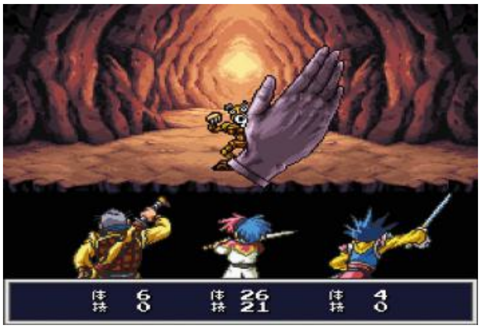
While Hudson was still hard at work on a proper sequel, it also created a side story called *Tengai Makyou Zero*, released in 1995 for the Super Famicom. By this point, the PC Engine was losing steam, and the developers wanted to expose the series to a wider audience – after all, *Tengai Makyou* was popular, but it wasn’t nearly as big as either *Dragon Quest* or *Final Fantasy*. As with many franchises that moved from CD platforms to ROM cartridges, a number of compromises had to be made, but the end result is still pretty good.

The story takes place in a different era from that in the previous games, far in the past, when Jipang was divided up into six nations, united by the leader of the Dragon Kingdom. However, the devious Ninigi has been resurrected, and it’s up to Higan, hero of fire, to destroy him. The story and humour is in keeping with previous games, but being on a cartridge, there are far fewer cutscenes (though what’s present still looks pretty good) and no digitised speech. Though the soundtrack is no longer orchestrated, the music here is still fairly decent. The ROM size is fairly large, at 40 megabits, though it also includes a decompression chip (as did Enix’s *Star Ocean*) to allow more data to fit onto the cartridge. The in-game visual style has changed: in most areas, the characters have more realistic proportions, à la *Chrono Trigger*, though the chibi sprites are maintained for the overworld. The battle system has changed slightly, now viewed from an over-the-shoulder perspective, à la *Phantasy Star II* and *IV*, so you can see your party members attacking.

The big gimmick of *Tengai Makyou Zero* is the PLGS (Personal Live Game System), as the cartridge also has a built-in clock that functions as a calendar. There are special events in various areas depending on the year and day, particularly on holidays; it also requests the player’s birthday and gives them a customised celebration when it comes around. The downside here is that this drains the battery more quickly than usual, so most cartridges need to have them replaced, plus the Japanese holiday schedule was changed, so events don’t line up after the beginning of the 21st century. None of these are issues when playing on an emulator, since the clock can be tweaked manually, but there’s no way to manually adjust the clock without restarting your saved game. Plus, it’s possible to miss events if you can’t play on a certain day, then you must wait weeks or even months until these events come back around.

For the most part, the game plays similarly to the others, though characters learn new skills in different ways (Higan needs to hunt down and challenge hermits, his pal Subrau must find

Many Super Famicom versions of CD games ended up being substantial downgrades, but while *Tengai Makyou Zero* is missing the fancy cutscenes and voices, it’s still no cheap spinoff, offering interesting gimmicks and high-quality visuals.



見ろ！　これが悪魔の印だ！
みんな言ってる！　夕能　悪魔の戦士！

雷神 HP 76 TP 49
攻撃
魔法
奥義
道具
防御
逃亡
AI
夢見 HP 41 TP 74
夕能 HP 80 TP 60
神司 HP 59 TP 31
アペティ

ほらね！　これがボクたちの
移動要塞・アラモさ！　ボクら　こいつで
暗黒教団と戦ってるんだ！

美しいお話です！　…悲しいお話です！

Tools
HOTEL

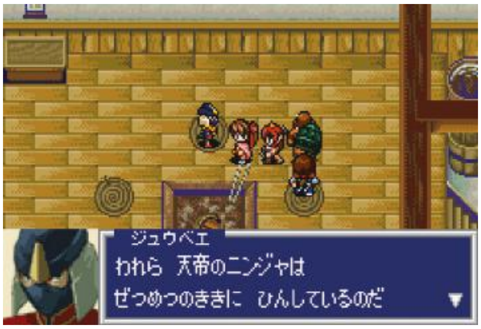
If there's one *Tengai Makyou* game that should've been localised, it's *The Apocalypse IV*, which includes a hilariously warped view of the United States.

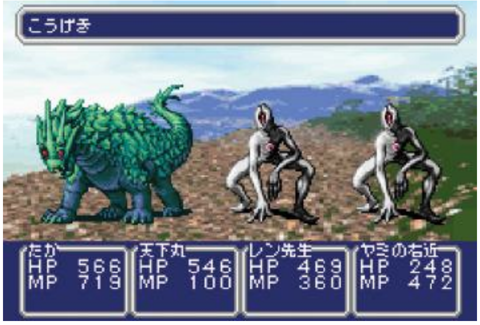
treasure chests hidden in each country, etc.) To tie in with the PLGS, you can also hatch eggs and breed pets, which act as summon spells in combat. There's also a fairly elaborate sub-quest in which you can visit tea houses and attempt to romance the women that reside there, by showering them with gifts (up to and including buying them a house). You can get some good items this way, though it is a little time consuming, plus it's a little weird considering that Higan is a 12-year-old kid hitting on adult women. Overall, the game's an interesting bit of technology, though the story and characters don't really live up to those in the PC Engine games, and outside of its novelty, it fails to stand out in the SFC RPG crowd.

By this point, the third *Tengai Makyou* game, subtitled *Namida*, was in development for NEC's PC-FX, the 32-bit successor to the PC Engine. Unfortunately, the system was performing very poorly against competitors, and support was dropped for the system in 1997, which led to the cancellation of the game. Very little of it has ever been made public, outside of some artwork, so it's questionable how far development had actually progressed. Hudson later used the name and basic concept for a 2005 PlayStation 2 game, though it's quite different from the original scenario by Shoji Masuda, which was adapted into a series of novels called *Haruka Tenkuu no Yamataikoku* and *Haruka Enten no Yamataikoku*.

The series continued on the Saturn with *Tengai Makyou: Daiyon no Mokushiroku* ("The Fourth Apocalypse"). There's a roman numeral IV on the title so it kind of acknowledges that there had been a lost third game. This entry shifts the setting away from Japan to North America, starring a young man named Rizing, a member of the Fire Tribe, like Ziria and Majimaru before him. Beginning in Alaska, the game eventually moves southward, visiting towns like Seattle, Chicago, and New York City, and even spend a little bit of time in Mexico. Along the way, you'll meet Yuuno, a Native American woman; Zengou, an immigrant from Jipang who desperately wishes he was a samurai, but is actually just a butcher; Ace, a cowboy gunslinger who's a relative of the earlier hero Kabuki; Bob, a Jamaican bobsledder; and Kamon, an evil robot who turns good.

Much like that of Japan in the PC Engine *Tengai Makyou* games, this game world's North American history and geography bear only passing resemblances to the real thing. Alaska, for example, is an island, Rizing crosses the ocean with the help of an enormous buffalo god, and Seattle and Portland are transplanted from their real-life locations to the state of Montana. Indeed, part of the appeal of this game is seeing these JRPG interpretations of US cities, and areas like Carlsbad Caverns represented as dungeons. It's also a mishmash of standard


ジュウベエ
われら 天帝のニンジャは
ぜつめつのききに ひんしているのだ



***Oriental Blue* was a reboot of the *Tengai Makyou* concept, but unfortunately it wasn't much of a success.**

role-playing magic (Native Americans have the ability to teleport around the country, for example) and anachronisms (there are cars, tanks, robots, gigantic mechas, and televisions, to name a few items that didn't exist in the early 20th century). The bosses are just as ridiculous as before too: Candy is a young starlet whose siren calls cause young people to join her; Ron Terry is an evil Hollywood producer who uses the power of film to draw innocent wannabe actors and actresses into the cult's grasp; Madam Appetit is a large pig-woman who leads a gang known as the Debu ("Fat") Rangers, and whose goal is to make everyone in southwest America obese, and then turning them into food; and TV Man is a man with a television for a head, who brainwashes the citizens of Atlanta with propaganda.

While the 2D sprite-based visuals used throughout are high quality, it's really the battle scenes that are most impressive. The enemies here take up almost the entire screen, looking almost like a real anime battle. The animation is a little limited, and you can only fight a few enemies at once, but the effect is incredibly cool-looking. It's a shame so many 32-bit era RPGs went for 3D over quality 2D like this. There are plenty of anime cutscenes too, many used for dramatic emphasis during boss fights.

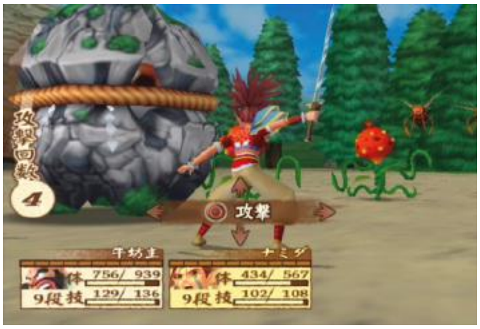
Beyond the initial Saturn release, *Daiyon no Mokushiroku* was ported to the PSP, which alters the proportions to make use of the system's 16:9 screen, and makes a few small minor additions and changes. This would've been a good time to introduce the series to English speakers, especially since they'd be more likely to understand the themes and settings than any of the ones set in Jipang, but, unfortunately, it was not meant to be.

The next entry, *Oriental Blue: Ao no Tengai* for the Game Boy Advance, released in 2003, is something of a soft reboot. The game still starts off in ancient Japan (and even leaves the country to visit other areas of East Asia), but the style and tone are drastically different from those of previous games, abandoning the bright anime character designs for a more serious look. The first-person battle system of the first two PC Engine titles is retained, but otherwise you probably couldn't tell it's a part of the same series.

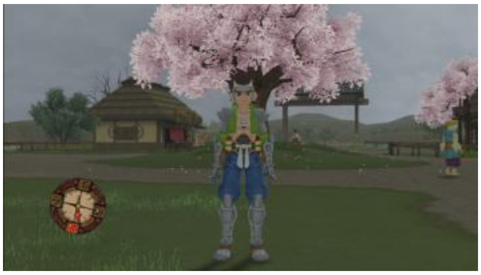
The game opens with you choosing a male or female protagonist, who begins to have visions in which a girl warns of monsters that must be stopped. *Oriental Blue* features what developers call a "free scenario system", whereby the storyline can be influenced by your actions – in addition to a plethora of sub-quests, the plot can change depending on whether you defeat certain bosses, and different characters (over ten in total) can join you, depending on your main character. While the somewhat non-linear system is a great idea, it still goes at the molasses pace of the older games, without maintaining much of the old goofy joy. The game was meant to be the start of a new trilogy, but it was a flop, and subsequent games were cancelled.

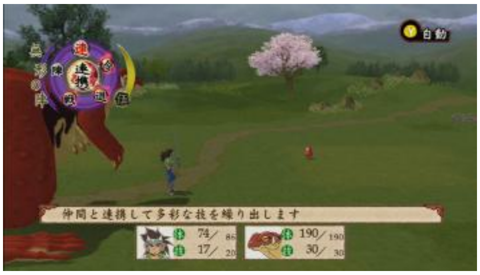
In the PlayStation 2 era, Hudson decided to revive the series by looking back at its infamously cancelled PC-FX game *Tengai Makyou III: Namida* and attempting to revive it. The hero is Namida, a young man with amnesia who washed ashore near a small village when he was a little boy. When evil demons – known as Ami – kidnap his friend Ichiyo and destroy their town, it's up to him to save her. Naturally, Namida has "great power", and after

***Tengai Makyou* is one of the many RPGs that just couldn't evolve with the times, as the subpar PlayStation 2 entry attests.**



PlayStation.2
天外魔境





XBOX 360
天外魔境

Gaijinworks began localisation production on the *Ziria* remake for the Xbox 360, though it ended up falling though. Going by the poor visuals, it's unlikely it would have impressed anyone.

rescuing his friend, he sets off on a journey to free Jipang from the evil demon leader.

The battle system has been given a huge overhaul, ditching the old-fashioned first-person combat. While most RPGs have you fighting three, maybe four bad guys at a time, Namida routinely tosses around between ten and thirty foes. Each attack by your character can knock out as many as a dozen enemies, so combat moves quickly, and it's pretty cool to see your characters plow through rows of enemies like a bowling ball, sending them flying aside. Each character has a certain number of attacks per round, and can switch between regular attacks and special abilities.

The biggest problem, unfortunately, is the load times. Every time you change screen (including entering and exiting houses in towns), you're greeted by a load time of between three and seven seconds. This would be tolerable if the game was worthwhile, but while the overall product isn't bad, it's really missing a lot of the pizzazz and humour of the older games, and the new low-budget 3D visuals just don't have nearly the same charm as the old 2D artwork.

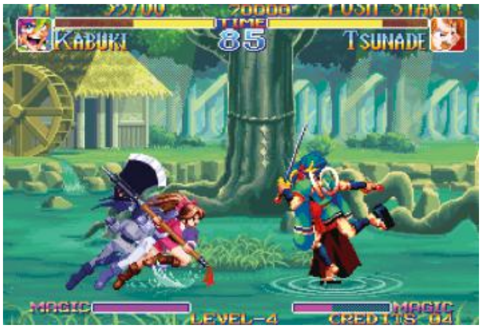
This spelled the end of the main *Tengai Makyou* series, though Hudson did go back to it with a remake of the first game for the Xbox 360, called *Tengai Makyou Ziria: Harukanaru Jipang* ("A Far Away Jipang"). Released only in Japan, around the platform's launch, it's actually based on an earlier draft of the story from before Shoji Masuda was involved, so while the characters and basic premise are the same, the actual events are quite different. So as a remake, it's indeed quite liberal with the source material. Probably the biggest change is that Ziria, who was mostly a silent protagonist before, is now a much more active personality.

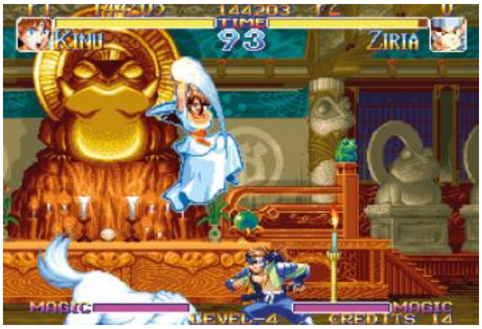
The visuals are entirely 3D, though given that the game came out very early in the system's life, it looks quite basic. The battle system uses a third-person perspective, and allows you to summon each character's respective animal (Ziria has a toad, Tsunade a slug, and Orochimaru a snake). It also has a number of brand new HD anime cutscenes. It's one of the few Japanese Xbox 360 games unreleased in North America and it's easy to see why – it was mostly meant as a way to hit the nostalgia buttons of Japanese gamers, giving them something familiar in a new context and with more modern mechanics, but on its own terms, it's just a rather basic RPG with relatively poor graphics.

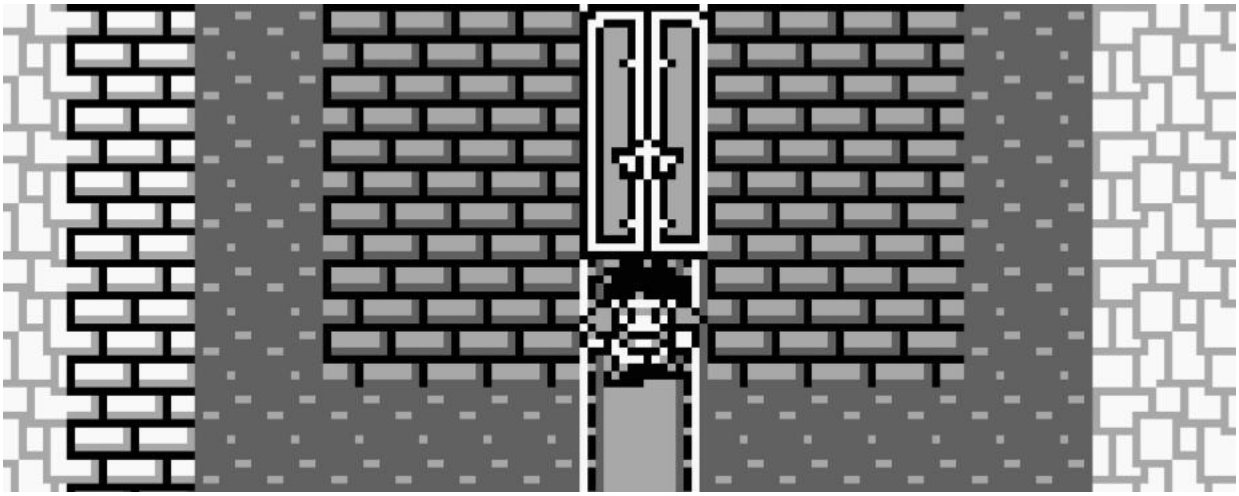
There were a handful of spinoffs as well. *Tengai Makyou Shinden* is a 2D fighting game for the NEOGEO, which is basically SNK's *Samurai Shodown* but using characters from *Tengai Makyou Ziria* and *Manjimaru*. This is actually the only piece of *Tengai Makyou* output that made it outside of Japan, where it was known as *Far East of Eden: Kabuki Klash*. *Kabuki Ittouryoudan* is another 2D fighter for the PC Engine Arcade Card. It isn't quite a sequel to *Kabuki Klash* – rather than aping *Samurai Shodown*, it more closely mimics *Street Fighter II*, right up to utilising the six button pad. And *Tengai Makyou: Dennou Karakuri Kakutouden* is a "full motion video fighting game" for the PC-FX – which essentially means you push buttons and watch footage of your character doing some special moves.

Tengai Makyou's golden age was in the 16-bit era – despite the quality of the Saturn game, it saw its greatest successes on the PC Engine and will forever be associated with it. It's unfortunate that it was connected to a system with minimal presence outside of Japan, because it's a delightfully lively series that remains largely inaccessible to this day.

***Kabuki Klash* is a solid fighter, if rather unoriginal, but at least it gives English speakers an introduction to the main casts of the PC Engine *Tengai Makyou* games.**

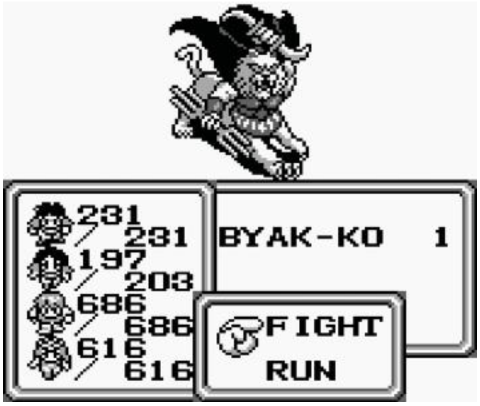






The Final Fantasy Legend

Developer: Square | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): GB, MOB, WSC



GAME BOY
THE FINAL FANTASY LEGEND

Following the success of the first two 8-bit *Final Fantasy* games, Square began development of a portable RPG. Rising to this challenge was Akitoshi Kawazu, who had worked on both *Final Fantasy* games as a designer, and was an avid *Wizardry* player who desired a more advanced gameplay experience from a Japanese RPG. The result of all this was the first entry in what would become Square's other long-lasting popular RPG series, *SaGa*, though it was initially known in North America under the *Final Fantasy Legend* moniker.

The game opens up by relating the legend of the tower in the centre of the world. It is said that the top of this tower is where paradise can be found, but none who have attempted to make the climb have ever been heard from again. Undaunted, one person sets out to find the answer for themselves. The bosses are all based on the Chinese constellations – Gen-bu the turtle, Sei-ryu the dragon, Byak-ko the tiger, and Su-zaku the bird – and are led by Ashura, the Japanese god of war. The final battle is against the "Creator", this being one of the early JRPGs where you fight against God.

Unlike most RPGs of the era, this one lets you select your gender and choose from multiple character races that grow stronger in different ways: Humans, who boost stats with items; Mutants, who gain stats randomly; and Monsters, who eat the meat of other monsters to transform. Combat is simultaneously simple and complicated. Battles are turn-based affairs, wherein you queue up actions for the party to undertake during an exchange of blows. The complications come from the difficulty of the encounters, and the system of equipment and abilities available to the party. Owing to the game's *Wizardry* roots, multiple enemies of the same type are grouped together, necessitating a distinction between group and all-enemy attacks. Should a party member fall, they will lose one of three hearts and in the event that all are lost, they cannot be revived without an extremely pricey item. Weapons also break after repeated use. This, along with the random growth of the mutants, would become key elements of later *SaGa* games.

The music, composed by Square old hand Nobuo Uematsu, is serviceable, though not particularly impressive. The visuals do a surprisingly good job of conveying the various environments the player will travel through, from basic fantasy plains and forests, to a post-apocalyptic sci-fi world. The scenarios are fondly regarded, owing to thoughtful construction of the set-pieces and characters in a vignette format. While the difficulty of the combat and the obscure nature of some of its systems can be off-putting, the game has nevertheless become something of a legend, and is, overall, a solid RPG.

The game would see coloured, but otherwise similar, remakes on the Wonderswan Color and mobile phone devices.

While this initial entry in the *SaGa* series was released as a separate franchise in Japan, it was marketed as a *Final Fantasy* spinoff in North America.

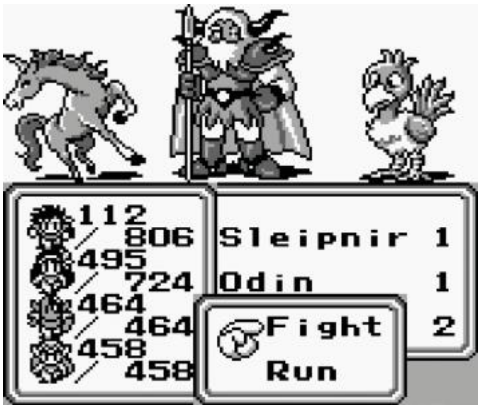
Final Fantasy Legend II

Developer: Square | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): GB, DS

Seeing release a year after its predecessor, *Final Fantasy Legend II* (subtitled *Hihou Densetsu* or "The Treasure Legend" in Japan) features a stronger story with an overarching plot and themes of unity and struggle. At the outset, the protagonist is entrusted with a magical shard called a Magi by his father, who then disappears. When the boy comes of age, he sets out to find his dad, becoming involved in a war amongst gods over the Magi, of which there are 77 to find.

While many of the systems within this game appear to be the same with a new coat of paint, some have been adjusted and others are entirely new. Combat again takes place in a queued-turn format whereby the party and monsters will exchange blows. The heart system has been removed and characters now recover to 1HP after combat. In addition, up to a certain point in the game, the party is given the option to attempt a fight again, should they be wiped out. Once again available to the player are Humans, Mutants and Monsters, with the latter two behaving similarly to those in the first game, while Humans play more like Mutants that are equipment specialists with quicker growth potential. New to the roster are Robots, whose stats have a direct correlation to what they're equipped with, but can't use magic and don't otherwise grow. Guest characters will also occasionally join the party, and you even shrink down to enter one of them to find some Magi. This game is also where the series' primary composer, Kenji Ito, first got involved, bringing with him the iconic musical stylings that the series is known for.

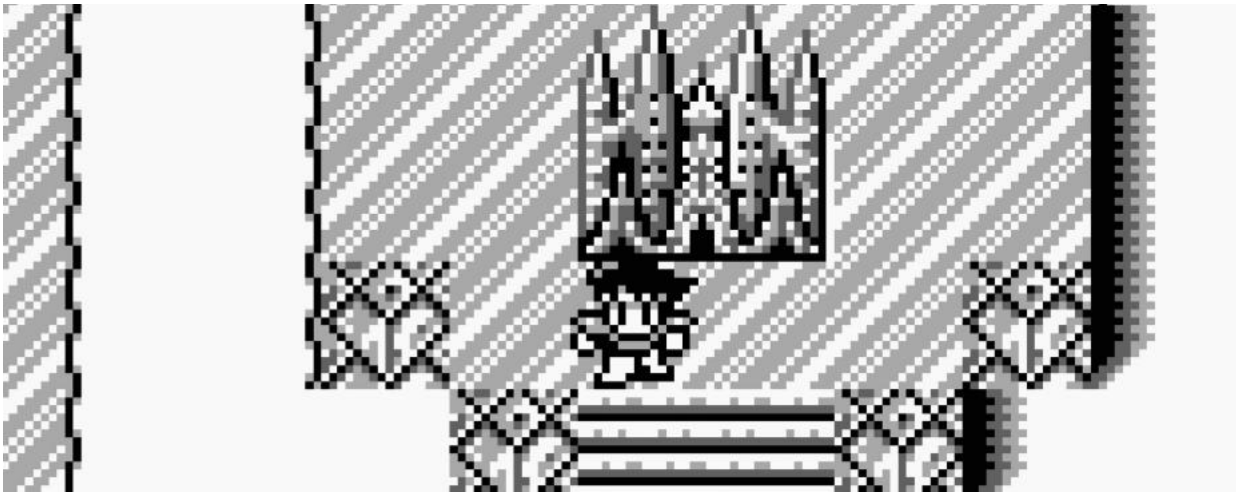
Among the Game Boy *SaGa* entries, this is largely regarded as the strongest. The Western localisation saw a fair amount of censorship, the most famous being the substitution of bananas for opium in a Japanese shogunate-era world; truly a more heinous fruit there never was.



In 2009, a DS remake bearing the title *SaGa 2: Hihou Densetsu: Goddess of Destiny*, was released in Japan, developed primarily by Racjin. This version retains the core mechanics of the original while being less opaque in its functionality, in addition to including various features and quality-of-life improvements. Of particular note is the Threads of Fate system, in which using a currency best described as divine favour, the party can purchase threads that carry a certain emotional bond. During battle the player will occasionally be prompted to use a thread in offensive or defensive situations, leading to a threaded party member coming to another's defence, or combining an attack with them. Sufficient use of this system establishes a bond defined by the most-used thread, allowing the party members to feel friendship, strife, hatred, love and so on for one another, and this can result in additional sequences, adding some personality to the otherwise rudimentary party.

GAME BOY
FINAL FANTASY
LEGEND II

Everything from the original *Final Fantasy Legend* has been refined, making the second game the standout of this Game Boy trilogy.



Final Fantasy Legend III

Developer: Square | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): GB, DS

While the initial *SaGa* game was the first handheld effort by Square, the third entry in the series would be the first effort of any kind by Square's branch in Osaka, filled by staff that came from XtalSoft. As such, the series regulars, including creator Akitoshi Kawazu, were not present for the development. Taking the position of producer, Chihiro Fujioka sought to make a third entry for this successful series. Instead, he made *Final Fantasy Legend III.*

The stage is set: a gigantic jar in the sky pours an infinite amount of water into the world, flooding it. Its denizens desperately conclude that the only thing they can do is to send three children into the past to somehow stop it. The player is assigned a set party of four – two humans named Arthur and Sharon, and two Mutants named Curtis and Gloria.

SaGa 3 is a drastic departure from previous entries, featuring experience-based levelling, set equipment slots in a horrendous equipment menu, no monster groups in combat, and the ability to jump even when not fighting. The defining characteristic of the game is that mechanical and biological beings are no longer entirely separate. The meat-drop system now features both meat and robot parts, acquisition of which moves party members through a sliding progression series: Monster, Beastman, Human/Mutant, Cyborg, Robot. The various attributes of the races in prior entries are included, indeed exaggerated, in these transformations, leading to a large degree of party flexibility.

The score was primarily composed by Ryuji Sasai, who brought a much heavier rock style to the music, resulting in much more energetic tracks than in previous entries. The visuals are an odd mix, featuring highly detailed and involved locale visuals and tilesets, yet rather slipshod sprites and mismatched fonts.

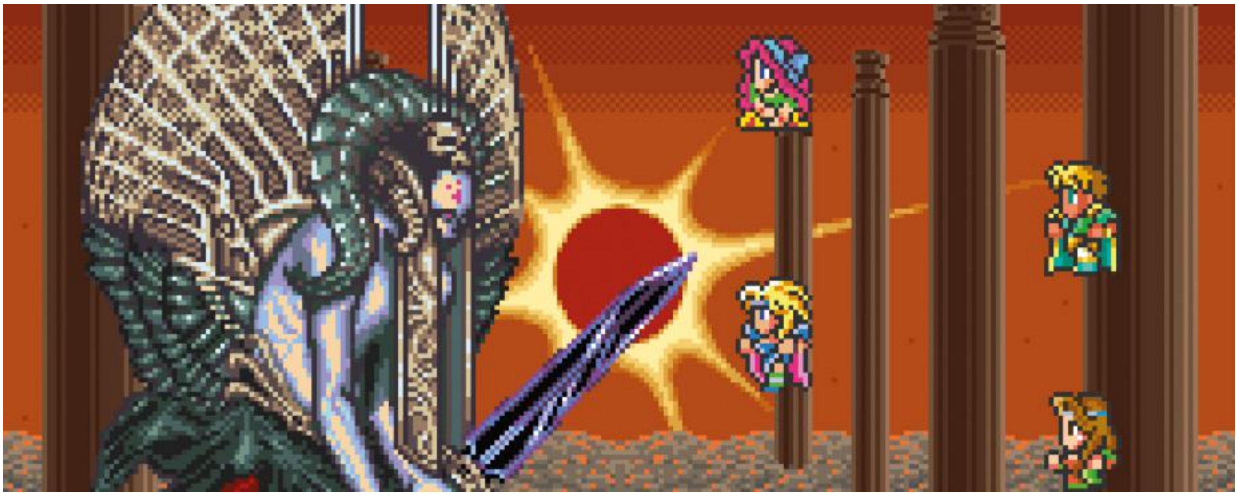
Talon attacks
with UE-Ray!

On its own, this is a perfectly serviceable game but as a *SaGa* game it is something of an anomaly. It looks like its predecessors, and shares attributes with them, but it doesn't really grasp what made them special.

2011 would see the Japanese release of a remake on the DS bearing the title *SaGa 3: Jikuu no Hasha - Shadow or Light*, now with Kawazu involved in its development. This version features series staples such as Sparking, action-related growth, and weapon skill-levels, in addition to expanding on the racial transformations, such as making Humans and Mutant distinct. The player can also make use of time manipulation, calling upon an echo of the past to repeat a character's action, just one of a range of new actions related to the time-travelling theme of the game. On the whole, the remake is a far superior version, which feels like a *SaGa* game and yet maintains the distinct traits of the original.

GAME BOY
FINAL FANTASY
LEGEND III

This final game in the Game Boy *SaGa* trilogy was designed by a totally different team, and it shows. Though perhaps not on the box!



Romancing SaGa

Developer: Square | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): SFC, WSC, PS2

While the Osaka branch of Squaresoft was intent on proving its value to the company with the *SaGa 3* project, Akitoshi Kawazu and the usual *SaGa* crew were working on the series' first entry on the Super Famicom, dubbed *Romancing SaGa*, which was released just a few months later. The visuals received an upgrade, though it still looks like a *Final Fantasy* game, just now with 16-bit visuals. Artist Tomomi Kobayashi became a series regular as the character illustrator. Composer Kenji Ito resumed his efforts, solidifying the kind of rocking sound that would distinguish the series (particularly the battle tunes) and composing the initial version of the series' iconic song "Overture".

Set in the world of Mardias, *Romancing SaGa* tells the story of one of eight protagonists (including princesses, pirates, performers, and more) as the return of the god of destruction, Saruin, draws nigh. In ages past, the gods created ten Fatestones to seal Saruin's power within themselves, imprisoning the cruel god, after the chosen champion had battled with and defeated him. Now the agents of Saruin seek the Fatestones, so that he will be at his full glory upon his return, leaving the heroes in a race against time to claim the Fatestones for themselves.

Romancing SaGa's combat is simultaneously a simple and yet immensely complicated affair. The player's party, which consists of up to six characters, is arranged on a 3 × 3 grid and must face and engage an enemy that can come from any direction. Complicating matters is the fact that weapons have set maximum effective distances, so shorter-range weapons are useless from further back. In addition, weapon skills are tied to the specific weapon and are gained as the character becomes more proficient with that particular weapon; should the character unequip any weapon then the accrued proficiency will be permanently lost.

Of note is the non-linear structure of the game. Quests will become available, or not, based on your Battle Rank, which is in turn based on how many fights you've been in. Some are quite large-scale, and are part of grander multi-quest plots, while others are more isolated and contained. A player's ability to explore is limited only by where they're able to walk and who in their party has knowledge of other locations.

In 2005, *Romancing SaGa* received a remake on the PlayStation 2, called *Romancing SaGa: Minstrel's Song*, which incorporated many lessons that had been learned in the nearly 15-year series lifetime. It's one of the most well-rounded entries, being among the most approachable of the systems-based games. However, it is let down somewhat by the art department. While the original had character designs by Tomomi Kobayashi, the series' primary character designer, the remake's designs were handled by Yusuke Naora, with character models that seem weirdly disproportionate. Still, the arranged music is excellent, and it's the only official way to play the first *Romancing SaGa* in English.

Romancing SaGa
SQUARE

***Romancing SaGa* might look like a *Final Fantasy* game at first glance, but if you try to play it like one, you'll be in for a surprise.**

Romancing SaGa 2

Developer: Square | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SFC, IOS, AND, PSV, PS4, WIN, XB1, NSW

Many *SaGa* games are notoriously unfinished for one reason or another; as such, they tend to have problems that constitute hindrances to proper appreciation of their undoubted merits. Such cannot be said, however, for the second Super Famicom entry. Made in under a year following the release of its predecessor, series creator Akitoshi Kawazu and his usual suspects – composer Kenji Ito and character designer Tomomi Kobayashi – created one of the most fully realised entries in the series, *Romancing SaGa 2.*

Romancing SaGa 2 follows the tale of the Empire of Avalon. On starting a new game, the player first names the Emperor or Empress; the stage being set, the ruler listens to a minstrel recount the tale, beginning with the first Emperor, Leon and his second son, Gerald. The bard sings of how the Empire was beset by the first of the Seven Heroes who had once saved the world, Leon's first son Victor being slain in the attack. Swearing vengeance upon the heroes, now become demons, Leon begins Avalon's crusade to end the threat that these Heroes now pose against the world, a tale that would span generations, with each new Emperor and Empress inheriting the will and strength of all that came before.

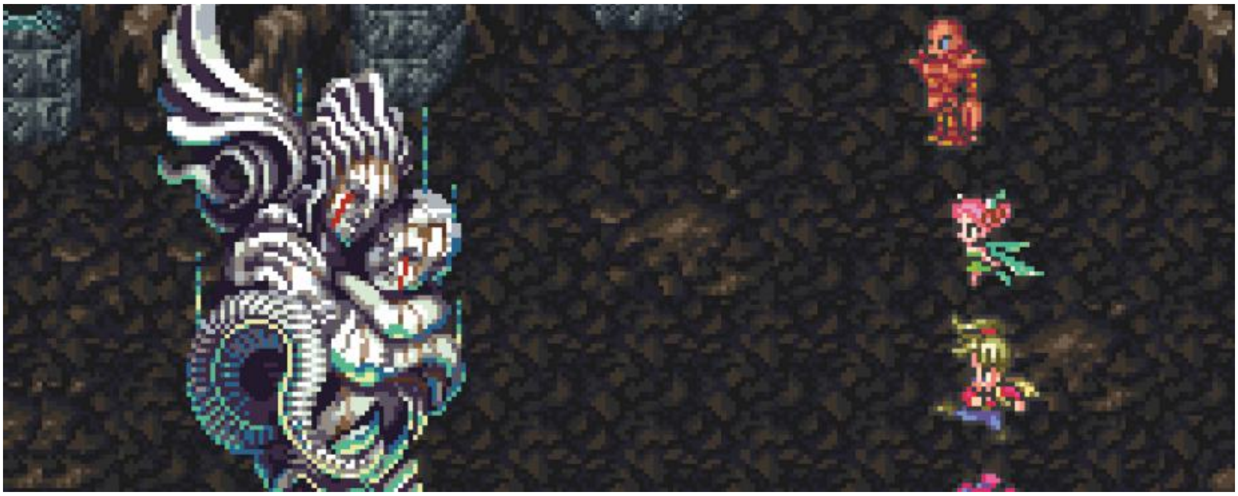
Many regard *Romancing SaGa 2* the point where the series hit its stride, as it's where many of the *SaGa* hallmark concepts and mechanics were introduced, as carried into subsequent games. A character's competence with a given kind of weapon or spell is developed as they use it, their proficiency improving as they do so. In addition, a character may be permitted a "spark of genius" in combat (called either the Glimmer or Tech Spark system), symbolised by a light bulb flashing over their head. Thus, they can dynamically learn a new technique with their current weapon, an ability they retain permanently. Should a character be knocked out they'll lose a Life Point (LP); should they lose all of their Life Points they will be permanently dead. Each generation of ruler will eventually be replaced as they become old or perish in battle, with the skills and spells carried forward to the new generation by the dynasty's inheritance magic.

The non-linear structure shines, providing many regions and nations for the Avalon Empire to interact with, the latter often becoming involved in the struggles of its neighbours. The ruler's decisions matter greatly, as they control whether the Empire makes allies and expands its borders, or has to contend with closed borders and mounting disadvantages in its campaign.

Like its predecessor, *Romancing SaGa 2* did not see official Western release until a 2016 remaster, released on various platforms, the first non-Japanese release for the series since 2005. While Square Enix's mobile versions of its SNES *Final Fantasy* entries are met with derision over the visual stylings, the 2016 remaster looks very good, using the original sprites and music while giving the backgrounds a pretty facelift that shows how it's done.

Romancing SaGa 2

The second Super Famicom game established many aspects of this eccentric series as we know it today.



Romancing SaGa 3

Developer: Square | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC, PSV, PS4, WIN, XB1, NSW, IOS, AND

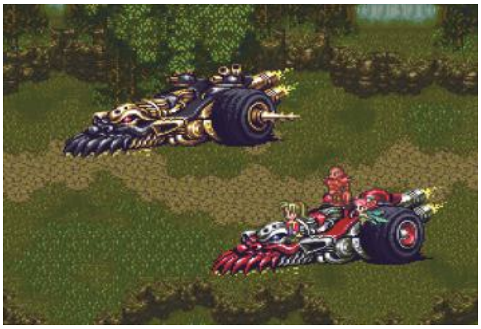
Oftentimes a game's merits are weighed against its flaws: "it would be good if it wasn't for 'this thing'". While it is rare for a developer to mar their work on purpose, flaws are found even in the best of things. The third Super Famicom *SaGa* game is rather clearly the least finished. And yet despite this, it's also one of the most beloved entries in the series.

The game opens with an explanation of the Death Eclipse, a 300-year cyclical phenomenon that ends the lives of all newborn creatures, be they humans, animals, or monsters. None are spared. And yet, historically, two children have survived this event: a 600 year-old tyrant who overthrew the world and then disappeared, and a 300 year-old hero who brought peace to the world in the wake of the tyrant. The most recent eclipse happened a decade ago, and the world waits in suspense to find out what kind of child will have survived. Once again, eight playable characters are poised to become involved with the destiny of the world, although their own concerns cannot be ignored, be they the fragmentation of a nation, the recovery of a valuable heirloom, or the conduction of business.

Mechanically, *Romancing SaGa 3* most strongly resembles *RS2* in its combat setup, with characters becoming increasingly proficient with weapons and spells the more they use them, and being able to dynamically learn new techniques mid-battle. New this time is the ability to shift the attribute of the battlefield towards one of the magically aligned attributes, such as wind or water, which can empower or weaken given effects or characters, leading to tugs-of-war to deny advantage to adversaries.

Where the game really shines, however, is its charm. Despite the dire tone of the introduction, *Romancing SaGa 3* isn't afraid to provide some levity in the various little stories that it tells. Imagine botching an ambush because one of your own party members had to go to the bathroom, a masked fighter for justice who has a fat stunt-double who is better at doing the job, the ability to have an actual snowman in your party, or fighting an out of control murder car while riding a murder car of your own in an otherwise swords and sorcery setting; there's no shortage of memorable moments in this game. So memorable, in fact, that it is held in high regard by the Japanese audience, with modern day Square Enix higher-ups who played it as children considering it a masterpiece. Amongst player communities it is the one most subject to fan-hacks to alter and expand upon it, leading to impressive cast compilations from the entire series. It shares with its immediate predecessor the honour of having had a live theatre performance based upon it.

Romancing SaGa 3 was not initially released in the West, but as with its predecessor, a remastered version was released in 2019. It takes many design cues from its predecessor and also includes some of the missing content, though it is hampered by a questionable localisation.



***Final Fantasy VI* may have had magic-wielding mechas, but *Romancing SaGa 3* has tricked-out murder cars.**

Feint
Hypnotism

SaGa Frontier

Developer: Square | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1

Five years after the English-language release of *Final Fantasy Legend III,* the *SaGa* series would finally return to Western shores; *SaGa Frontier* would be the first series entry to bear its original identity on both sides of the Pacific. It's not an exaggeration to say that many American fans, interested to see what the creators of *Final Fantasy VII* would do next, ended up sorely disappointed by its limited graphics and esoteric design.

A culmination of all of its predecessors, *SaGa Frontier* combined the multi-protagonist, non-linear story of *Romancing SaGa* with the customisable characters and sci-fi/fantasy mash-up of *Final Fantasy Legend,* constituting Akitoshi Kawazu's most ambitious project yet. The Battle Rank and Glimmer/Tech Spark systems from previous games are here, much the same as they ever were, plus the meat progression system from *Final Fantasy Legend* for transforming any monster party members. The biggest mechanical changes are a new combo system, in which between two and five active combatants can chain attacks together for obscene amounts of damage. Also, there's no way to run away from combat, a baffling decision offset by a quick-save system. As in previous *SaGa* games, LP is present: once the protagonist's LP is gone, it's game over. With a scant few exceptions, characters who lose all LP don't die permanently, but rather stay unconscious until the next visit to an inn.

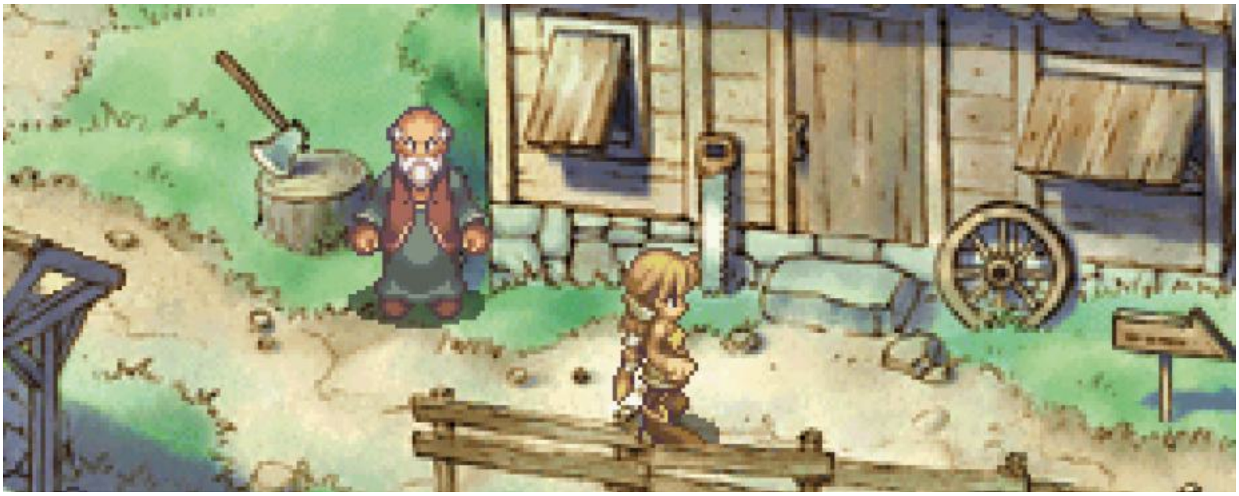
While each of *Romancing SaGa*'s multiple protagonists eventually found themselves funnelled towards the same endgame, *SaGa Frontier*'s seven heroes each have their own quest to fulfil and specific final antagonist to conquer. That's not to say there's no overlap the more nonlinear characters are dumped into the same open world to grind themselves up for their climactic encounters – but the varied, shorter questlines offered by *SaGa Frontier* make multiple playthroughs much more accessible and enticing than in many of its series forebears.

SaGa Frontier
PlayStation

Coming out in North America only a few months after *Final Fantasy VII,* anyone purchasing *SaGa Frontier* and expecting something similar would be utterly baffled. But that's basically the story of the entire series.

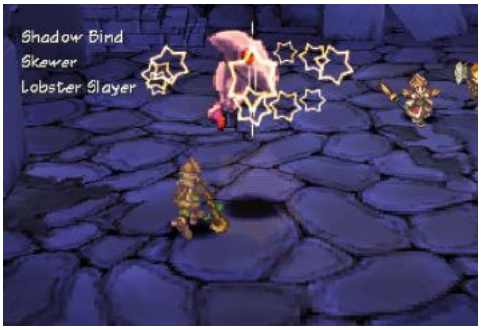
The crew is a motley bunch – there's Emelia, a woman framed for her husband's murder, who eventually breaks out of jail and joins a secret agent group; Red, who avenges his father's murder as the transforming superhero Alkaiser while juggling his day job aboard a cruise liner; Blue, a powerful magician on a journey to kill his brother Rouge; Asellus, a young woman bound by blood to a lord as part of his immortal harem; Riki, a monster from a dying world; T260G, an AI from an ancient battleship that's found itself in a robot body; and Lute, a lazy layabout who's kicked out of the house by his mother.

SaGa Frontier, like *Romancing SaGa 3* before it, is notoriously incomplete. Most noticeable is a handful of dungeons that can be explored top-to-bottom but seemingly have no plot relevance. Even Blue's ending is incomplete, fading to sepia and superimposing "The End" as the boss' last HP is depleted. A remastered port scheduled for mid-2021 seeks to reintegrate some of the cut content, including adding an extra character named Fuse.



SaGa Frontier II

Developer: Square | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1



SaGa Frontier 2
PlayStation
SQUARESOFT

The previous two *SaGa* trilogies took place in separate worlds, each series largely keeping the same general setting and tone. *SaGa Frontier II*, on the other hand, could not be any more different from its immediate predecessor. The sci-fi/fantasy mash-up is out the window in favour of a medieval drama, and the visual style is a breathtaking array of watercolour backdrops similar to those in *Legend of Mana*. Longtime *SaGa* series composer Kenji Ito sat this one out, in favour of Masashi Hamauzu, a new musician at Square at the time, who'd go on to compose for the *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy.

Set in the world of Sandail, the player appears to be a historian, poring over the records of the past century. To begin with, this consists of a few scant points on a timeline, which open scenarios. When these scenarios are completed, further points are unlocked on this map. There are only two protagonists this time: Gustave XIII, the newborn heir to the king of Finney, and Wil Knights, a 15-year-old scavenger of ruins.

Gustave's scenario is one of political intrigue. In the world of Sandail, a person's worth is judged by their Anima – their innate magical ability. However, as a child, Gustave is revealed to be unable to use Anima, causing the king to call for his own son's execution. Gustave's mother, Queen Sophie, pleads for their child to be spared, and the two are exiled from the castle. Gustave's scenario follows his youth before, as an adult, he stakes his claim on his heritage.

On the other hand, Wil is a commoner living with his aunt and uncle after being orphaned, who sets off on his first expedition hoping to find forgotten artefacts called Quells. Soon he learns of the existence of a powerful Quell called the Egg, which is somehow linked to his parents' demise. Wil spends his life unravelling the mystery of the Egg, passing the torch on to his children and, in due course, his grandchildren. The story of the Egg eventually intersects with Gustave's, leading to a grand conclusion involving the entire history of Sandail.

Compared to *SaGa Frontier* and *Romancing SaGa*, *SaGa Frontier II* is fairly linear. While optional quests exist, they're kept to a minimum in favour of mandatory scenarios that can occasionally be tackled out of order. Combat has been tweaked, so you can restore HP at the cost of LP, plus you can escape from battle after a few turns. Occasionally, you're given the option to duel an opponent. This changes the battle system quite dramatically; the player is given the choice of several offensive and support abilities, which, if executed in a specific order, can be combined to perform special attacks. These can be challenging but quite rewarding, though those who don't wish to engage can usually eschew duels in favour of fighting a few extra foes as a party.

After *SaGa Frontier II*, *SaGa* only became even more experimental. Sadly, entries would also become a lot more infrequent, which makes each one all the more special.

Compared to the previous *SaGa* games, there are so many changes that this one doesn't really feel like it belongs in the series, but at the same time, it's still so out-there that it couldn't possibly fit anywhere else.

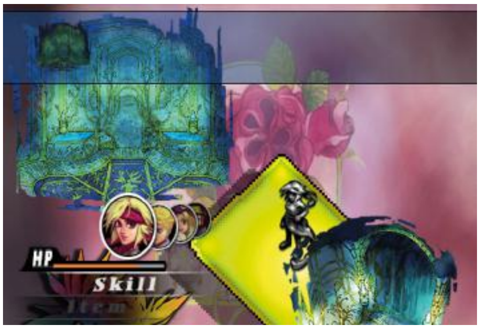
Unlimited Saga

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): PS2

Following *SaGa Frontier II*, Akitoshi Kawazu made the decision to take *SaGa* in a bold new direction. Inspired by his love of tabletop gaming, he wished to develop a game in which the focus was solely on the core mechanics, with all other details communicated through semiotics. The result was *Unlimited Saga*, an incredibly complicated board game that baffled audiences.

Trimming the fat from a series already lean on narrative, *Unlimited Saga* tells the story of seven different protagonists, whose paths intersect at the Iskandar Festival: Judy, a child travelling with her family to rescue her grandfather, who ends up trapped inside of a mirror; Ruby, a struggling fortune teller seeking to match the talents of her sister; Laura, a former pirate who ends up protecting a noble named Henri; Kurt, the son of a lord, who is travelling the world to figure out how to remove his cursed gauntlet; Mythe, an inventor hunting for a mysterious silver-haired woman he saw in a photograph; Armic the Chapa, a type of anthropomorphic beaver, out to save his village from a terrible drought; and Ventus, a man out for revenge against the vampire who killed his elder brother.

Towns function solely as beautifully painted backdrops to menus, so *Unlimited Saga* is primarily spent exploring wilderness and jungles. This is represented by a minimalist board, revealed as it's traversed by the player, who is represented by a pewter miniature. The player can move as they like, though every action taken counts as a turn, during which monsters also move.



Combat sees the player select five turns, choosing the combatant, attack type, and target ahead of time, which can then be executed in any order or even chained together as combos. Executing commands is where *Unlimited Saga* truly gets controversial: instead of being determined by hidden die rolls, actions are governed by the Reel System, a spinning slot machine that stops at the push of a button. Once additional weapon skills are Glimmered, they're added to the reel sporadically, and the player must land on them to pull them off. The reel doesn't always stop immediately either, which makes for a frustrating marriage of dexterity and luck.

Aside from combat, the Reel System frequently rears its head outside battle, as the party encounters traps – something with which *Unlimited Saga* is absolutely loaded. Traps are encountered frequently and randomly, avoidance requiring deft use of the Reel, and the same goes for disarming chests; almost all of which are trapped. Once a dungeon is traversed, each character is awarded a skill panel. These can grant proficiencies with weapon types, or bestow skills like the ability to pick locks or swim through flooded areas.

The definitive black sheep of *SaGa* (as denoted by its uncapitalised G), the world of 2003 just wasn't ready for *Unlimited Saga*. The Reel System combined with the game's tacit refusal to explain anything, makes it frustratingly opaque.

PlayStation.2
Unlimited Saga
SQUARE ENIX

***Unlimited Saga* makes a lot more sense if you think of it as a video game version of a tabletop RPG, or some kind of board game.**

SaGa: Scarlet Grace

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PSV, PS4, NSW, WIN

Acquiring a Phoenix Feather is no mean feat, for once touched by a living being, it fades away.

SaGa SCARLET GRACE

Unlimited Saga was a pretty major blow to the *SaGa* series. While Japanese audiences were more forgiving of its rather pointed flaws, there was no question that its infamy hurt the *SaGa* name to the point that the series would see nothing but remakes for over ten years, while the wounds closed. While series creator Akitoshi Kawazu had wanted to resume work on the series, it was difficult for him to get the support necessary to do so. It wasn't until Yoshimitsu Inagaki, an artist who had worked previously on the series and a contributor to the *Kingdom Hearts* series, lent a hand that a new *SaGa,* with the return of the old guard of Kenji Ito and Tomomi Kobayashi, became viable; *SaGa: Scarlet Grace* was ultimately released in 2016 for the PlayStation Vita.

In somewhat typical fashion for the series, *Scarlet Grace* is an open-ended and non-linear game, though this time only featuring four playable characters, rather than the usual eight. The game is set after the fall of The Empire, a world-spanning super-nation that once ruled all of civilisation, before the Last Emperor was assassinated, leaving the various territories to fall into ruin. Taking cues from *Romancing SaGa* and *SaGa Frontier,* the four characters available to the player have strikingly different positions in relation to this situation, such as Urpina being a young aristocrat of the Empire's House of Swords, while Leonard is peasant farmer with big dreams. The struggles of the four all revolve, in different ways, around the return of the Fire Bringer, the god that betrayed his peers.

In practice, *Scarlet Grace* has many departures from the usual *SaGa* fare, forgoing dungeons entirely and making all battles set-piece oriented. The player moves about a region-focused world-map that has a pop-up storybook feel to it. As usual, combat is a major focus of the game. While *SaGa* series is no stranger to complex strategies, *Scarlet Grace* has possibly the most depth it has ever seen. Every round of combat takes place over a Timeline, and support abilities, which, if executed in a specific order, can be combined to perform special attacks. Doing so is important, as any time an actor is defeated, the relevant gap on the timeline will close. Should the two actors that fill the gap be on the same side, other connected actors on that side will perform a Unite Attack, for a free combination attack against the opposition and discounts on the actions taken in the next round. Both allies and enemies alike are capable of performing Unite Attacks, and they can make all the difference.

Scarlet Grace received an updated version in 2018 for several other platforms, titled *SaGa Scarlet Grace: Ambitions,* which addressed issues in the original release, such as load times, while adding content, voice acting, and new music. In late 2019, this version became the first *Scarlet Grace* to hit Western shores. Critical reception was a bit mixed, but for the most part people enjoyed what the game had to offer, and appreciated its accessibility compared to that of earlier *SaGa* titles.

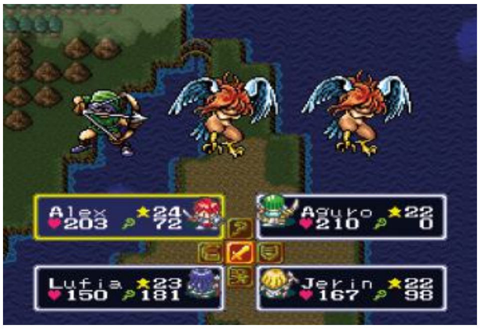
After resting the series for so long, *Scarlet Grace* might be *SaGa*'s shining achievement.

Lufia and the Fortress of Doom

Developer: Neverland | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SNES

Lufia and the Fortress of Doom is the debut game from Neverland, created by former Wolf Team employees, and published in Japan by Taito. The story starts off with quite a bang – four heroes storm the eponymous Fortress of Doom to take down the four evil god-like beings known as Sinistrals. This is not just a cutscene, but rather a playable prologue, as these fighters are already fully levelled up, with a comical quantity of experience points, strong equipment, and tons of spells. They succeed in saving the world, but two of them, Maxim and Selan, end up sacrificing themselves in the process. One hundred years of peace pass before the Sinistrals are resurrected, leading to widespread monster invasions, and Maxim's descendent takes up arms to fight back.

Outside the introduction, *Lufia and the Fortress of Doom* is a pretty typical early 16-bit RPG, both narratively and mechanically. The fighting is a little like *Dragon Quest*'s, with large enemy sprites displayed on the screen, able to move very slightly, though your fighters appear at the bottom next to their status windows and animate whenever you attack, resulting in something that feels a little less static. It's still pretty basic though – random encounters are regular (though quick) and it's pretty grindy in spots. The game lacks auto-targetting à la NES *Final Fantasy* games, so if you have two characters fight the same foe, if the first disposes of the enemy, the second will swipe at empty air and waste their turn. There are only four playable characters in the main story, too. In other words, it feels more like an 8-bit RPG, just with prettier 16-bit graphics and sound. The interface is a bit novel, at least, in that the various commands are activated by holding a direction on the directional pad, rather than being selected through a menu.



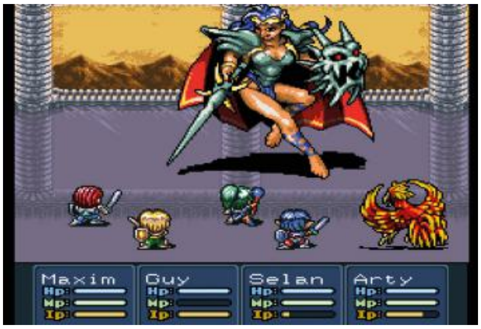
The only really unique thing about the game is the presence of Lufia, the hero's childhood friend, who was important enough that the English release was named after her. (The series is called *Estpolis Denki* or "Biography of Estpolis" in Japan, and none of the other games have Lufia in them, putting the international versions in a weird situation.) The setup is a lot like Game Arts *Lunar*, right down to Lufia's having blue hair as well as a mysterious past. She's also not really a warrior and just comes along with the hero to provide magical aid, but unlike *Lunar*'s heroine, who left the party early on, Lufia is instead a playable character for most of story. Though common now, it was rare at the time to have a heroine fight alongside the hero, especially while portraying a romance between the two, though the latter is pretty juvenile, since the game is aimed at teenagers.

Lufia isn't a particularly stand-out game, but the graphics are alright, and the soundtrack is decent (albeit lacking in its number of tracks). If nothing else, it helped establish a series that went on to do better things. It was originally conceived as a trilogy, though Neverland was only able to get two games out.

The first *Lufia* isn't particularly stellar, but it does lay the groundwork for the much better sequel.

Lufia II: Rise of the Sinistrals

Developer: Neverland | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SNES



Lufia II
Rise of the Sinistrals
Super Nintendo

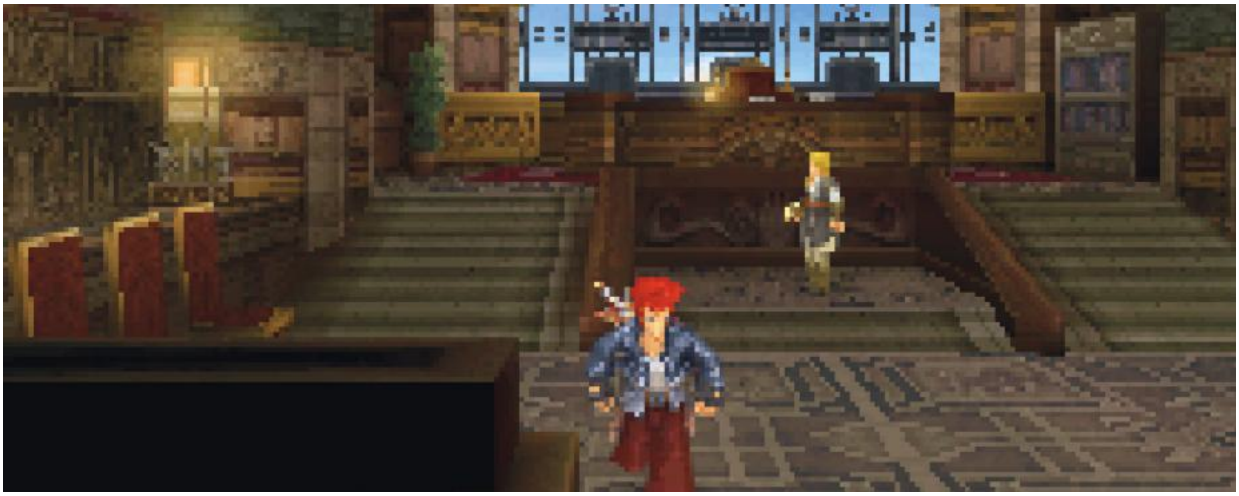
The brief prologue of the original *Lufia*, featuring the sacrifice of heroes Maxim and Selan, proved to be the most interesting part of that game, so of course it made sense to make it the focus of the sequel. *Lufia II* begins somewhat similarly, as Maxim and his childhood friend Tia argue over his dangerous monster-fighting ways, eventually leading to them joining forces to fight the evil Sinistrals. The story itself is still pretty typical, but the dramatic irony present makes it so much more compelling. We know that the main heroes are doomed, as the final dungeon is of course the same one as presented in the first *Lufia*'s prologue, and nothing can change their fates. But it works in smaller ways too, as we know that poor Tia's crush on Maxim will go unrequited, since he's meant to end up with warrior woman Selan.

Beyond the narrative, other elements have been expanded quite a bit. Battles work much as before, though the characters themselves now appear on the battlefield. New is the IP ("Ikari Points") gauge. Points which fills up as you take damage and can be channelled into super-attacks appropriate to the equipped weapon. There are also enemies called Capsule Monsters; you can capture one of these to use as a fifth party member in battle. While there are only seven of these Monsters, of different elements, they can evolve based on items that you feed them. It's obviously inspired by *Dragon Quest V*, but it's neat to see the concept in action before *Pokémon* popularised it worldwide a few years later.

Perhaps more ambitiously for a 16-bit game, the approach towards dungeon design has changed, as dungeons more closely resemble those in games like *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. Maxim can fire arrows to stun enemies or hit switches from far away, there are many puzzles that involve picking up or moving blocks; other items like bombs and hookshots are used to make your way through. Enemies are visible on the map and only move when you do, allowing you to engage or avoid at your whim. There's also an optional area called The Ancient Cave, a 99-floor randomised dungeon that strips your characters all of their items and reverts them back to level one. However, certain items can be taken from here and used in the main adventure, making it worth your while to crawl through it. It's an early implementation of the Japanese Rogue-like style of game, popularised by Chunsoft's *Mystery Dungeon* a few years earlier. It's also pretty impressive that it's a mere side quest on top of an already fully featured RPG.

Everything about *Lufia II* comes together very well. The visuals have improved and the soundtrack is even better than before, especially its battle themes. There are some localisation programming glitches in the North American version, though many were fixed for the European release. So while the game may not be among the heavy hitters, it's definitely one of the classics of the 16-bit era. It was remembered fondly enough to get a remake for the Nintendo DS, although that also changes a whole lot.

Though it doesn't have quite the same cultural pull as any of Square's or Enix's many 16-bit RPGs, *Lufia II* ranks up next to most of them.



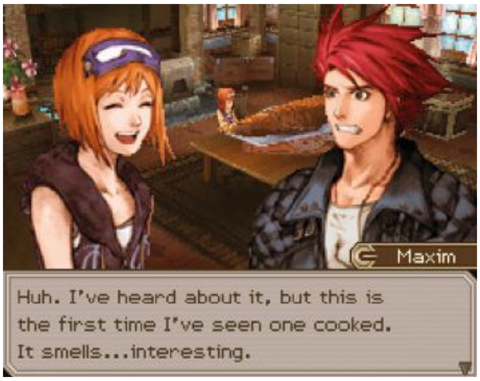
Lufia: Curse of the Sinistrals

Developer: Neverland | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): DS

There have been several remakes of classic JRPGs over the years, but perhaps none are as drastic as the DS remake of *Lufia II*. Indeed, it's more accurate to say that the developers made a completely different game that was inspired by *Lufia II* than that they actually adapted it.

The biggest and most obvious change is the shift from a turn-based RPG to an action-based one. It was still developed by Neverland, the company behind the original *Lufia* games, but their expertise had shifted to this style of gameplay, having worked on *Record of Lodoss War* for the Dreamcast and both *Shining Force Neo* and *Shining Force EXA* for the PlayStation 2. In practice, it looks and plays somewhat like the modern *Ys* titles, with the player taking control of one character while the CPU manages two others, while you can switch between them at will. Rather than having different tools, each character has a unique skill, since there are still puzzles to be solved in the dungeons. Altogether, it's hampered by numerous issues, including questionable camera placement, lack of analogue control, and the low quality 3D of the original DS, but the fighting is still satisfying regardless.

Much has changed with the story too. The original had a slow ramp-up, as the hero Maxim began investigating the resurgence of monsters, while the DS game gets to the point more quickly, as the Sinistrals have already awakened and are the primary target. Several characters are very different in looks and personality – Tia, the girly whip-wielding shopkeeper who ditched the party fairly early on, is now something of a mechanic who attacks with a briefcase and plays a much larger role in the story. The basic plot beats are more or less the same as the SNES original, though the adventure still plays out very differently. However, in a second replay, it is possible to change events so Maxim and Selan can live at the end.



Huh. I've heard about it, but this is the first time I've seen one cooked. It smells...interesting.

The new artwork is typical JRPG stuff, but differs quite a bit from the original, and gives more personality to the characters, since they didn't even have portraits in the original game. The English release has plenty of relatively decent voice acting as well. The soundtrack has been adapted to the DS hardware and sounds pretty similar, though since there are no longer any separate battle scenes, the fighting tracks are now used as boss themes. The world design, sort of a sci-fi/fantasy hybrid, is also more interesting than the rather generic world of the original games.

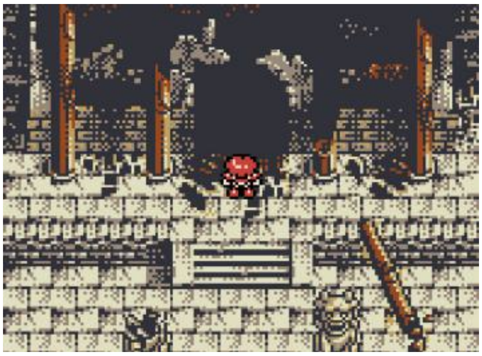
Many of the changes to this remake seem to have been so fans of the original could enjoy seeing familiar characters in new context, while still appealing to new players. That experiment seemed to have backfired though, with many fans viewing this as far too drastic a departure to be even considered as *Lufia II*. Outside of that context, it is a pretty good DS action RPG, if not quite up to Falcom standards.

NINTENDO DS
Lufia
Curse of the Sinistrals

This remake of *Lufia II* makes such substantial changes that it's basically a whole new game.

Lufia: The Legend Returns

Developer: Neverland | Released: 2001 | Platform(s): GBC



***Lufia: The Legend Returns* isn't the proper sequel fans might have been expecting.**

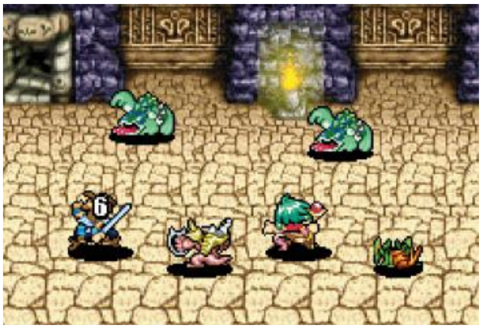
Lufia was planned as a trilogy, with the third entry, subtitled *Ruins Chaser*, to be released on the PlayStation. However the publisher, Nippon Flex, went bankrupt, and development was suspended. A few years later, the series was resurrected for the Game Boy Color, though taking a very different form. Taking place 100 years after the first *Lufia*, this game stars another red-haired swordsman, named Wain, who joins with another blue-haired girl, named Seena, to take down the resurrected Sinistrals.

All of the dungeons in this game are randomly generated, filled with unique treasures and traps. Because of that, all of the puzzle-solving elements of the prior two games are gone. Enemies are still visible on the map (at least in the dungeons), but combat is a bit different, primarily because you have up to nine characters in your party at once. They are divided up into a 3 × 3 grid, with one character in each grid square being able to act each turn. Each character is also assigned one of four Spiritual Force colours, granting them advantages if matching colours are placed together. Skills are obtained from scrolls found in dungeons, but they can't be learned unless the character has the appropriate amount of Spiritual Force points, converted from learning points obtained in battle.

Altogether, *Lufia: The Legend Returns* isn't bad, but the focus on battle and dungeon crawling really wasn't what fans of the series wanted, and the story lacks the elements that made its predecessor so likeable. It is one of the few Game Boy Color RPGs that isn't a monster-collecting game, so it has that going for it.

Lufia: The Ruins of Lore

Developer: Atelier Double | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): GBA

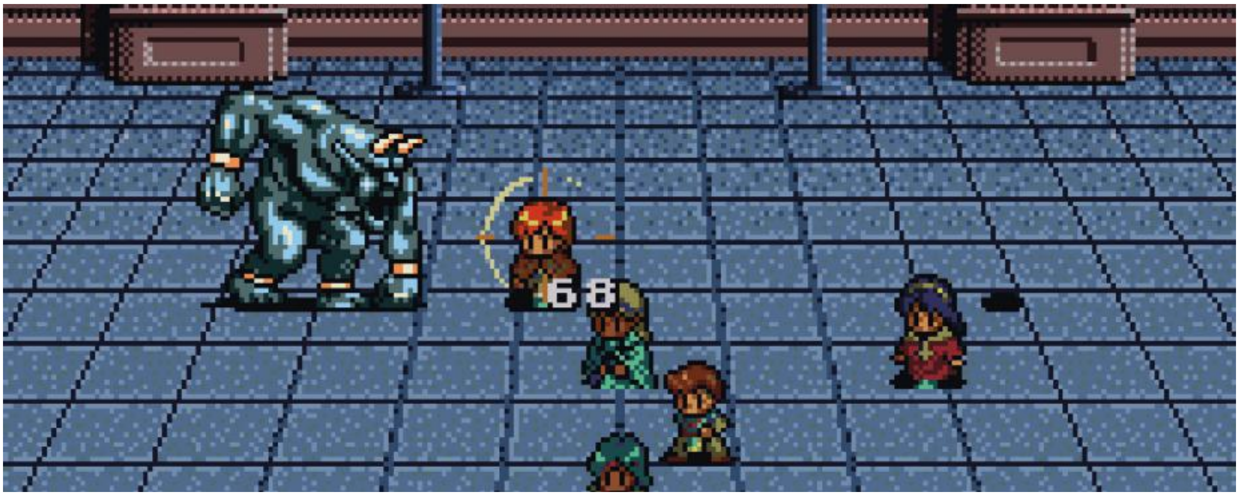


This *Lufia* game was helmed by a new team, and it shows.

Lufia returns for the fourth time in this game, which is regrettably another spinoff title rather than being based on the original plans for *Lufia III*. It features a group of kids who adventure throughout the world, on a quest to explore various ancient ruins. It takes place 20 years after *Lufia II* and stars a young boy named Eldin, who is following in the footsteps of his missing father. It's the only game in the series that doesn't revolve around the Sinistrals, though fan favourite character Dekar pops in for a cameo.

After the rather disappointing changes in the Game Boy Color game, *Ruins of Lore* plays much more similarly to the SNES *Lufia II*. It maintains the puzzle dungeons (though each character has their own skills rather than a single character using different tools, an element passed forward from the *Lufia II* DS remake.) It does greatly expand on the monster collecting though – before, there were only a small number of monsters you could capture, but now, almost any creature can join your team, levelling up, building relationships with the humans, and evolving into different forms. Humans even can fuse with monsters, creating advanced forms with improved abilities. Also new is a simple class system, which allows characters to gain skills based on which job they've undertaken.

The Ruins of Lore is a return to form for *Lufia*, at least as far as the gameplay goes, but it's still not up to the level of *Lufia II*. The soundtrack is poor and neither the story nor characters are particularly interesting. This is the only game not developed by Neverland, instead created by Atelier Double, and it really does feel like it's missing something without its original creators.



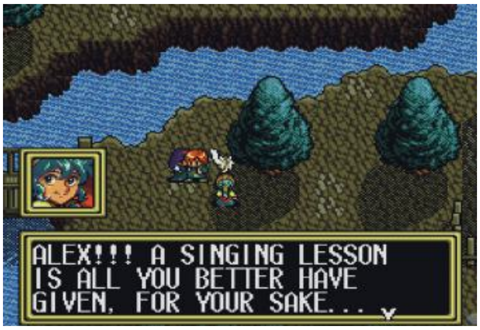
Lunar: The Silver Star

Developer: Game Arts/Studio Alex | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): SCD, SAT, PS1, PSP, GBA

The early days of the CD-ROM marked an exciting time for RPGs, especially on consoles. Without the space constraints of cartridges, CDs could hold cinematic sequences, voice acting, and much larger scripts. The *Lunar* series was at the forefront of this movement, having being released in mid-1992 in Japan, then at the end of 1993 in North America. It wasn't the first of its type – in Japan, the first big multimedia RPG was *Tengai Makyou: Ziria* for the PC Engine CD, released three years prior, plus there were other, lesser-quality efforts like the dreadful *Funky Horror Band*. But the *Lunar* series was still one of the most ambitious and most well-loved of these efforts, especially in the United States, where most of its earlier competitors were never released.

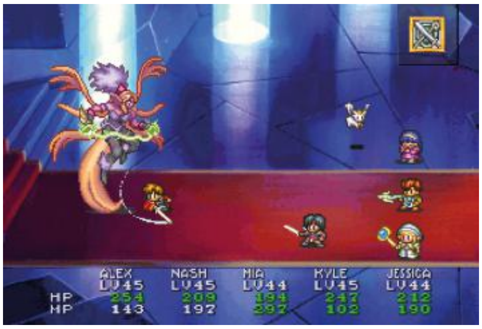
Lunar: The Silver Star focuses on a young boy named Alex, bored of his life in the backwater town of Burg. Along with Luna, his lady friend, and Nall, his flying cat companion, he sets off on an adventure to explore the land. As they continue their journey, they learn that the Goddess Althena, saviour of their world, has been reincarnated as a human, making her power vulnerable to abuse. It shouldn't be a surprise that Luna is actually Althena, and she is captured by the evil magician Ghaleon. Banding together with a group of heroes, Alex must follow in the footsteps of his long-departed role model, the Dragonmaster Dyne, to rescue the world and save his true love.

The story is predictable, especially since the opening animation gives away every major plot twist. But its strength doesn't really lie with its originality, so much as how it's told, bolstered by strong dialogue and characterisation. The Japanese script was written by novelist Kei Shigema (who also wrote some of the tie-in novels), which injects a certain level of charm missing from other early RPGs. And much of this is because the characters are so darned likable. Boorish warrior Kyle and headstrong mage Jessica have an on-again, off-again romance, while constantly trading barbs, while the arrogant Nash and meek Mia are similarly paired off. Alex is a non-entity for most of the game, but Nall makes for a fine comedic buddy who occasionally provides some sarcastic commentary.


ALEX!!! A SINGING LESSON IS ALL YOU BETTER HAVE GIVEN, FOR YOUR SAKE...

RPGs were rare on the Mega Drive, and even rarer on the Mega CD, with *Lunar* easily being one of the best.

It was also localised by Working Designs, whose work helped bring the characters to life. Granted, their approach revolved more around adaptation than literal translation, often weaving in jokes or completely replacing generic NPC speech with much more colourful dialogue. A lot of it is really funny, especially in the ways it fleshes out the primary characters. Luna, as it turns out, is sweet but more than a little possessive, threatening any girl that seems to get too familiar with her dear Alex. The character designs are attractive, and the opening sequence, with its awesomely cheesy vocal song, helps set the stage for the adventure. There are also some cool location designs, particularly the flying city of Vane, which houses a magical academy, and the



The White Dragon Cave, Alex?

SEGA SATURN
LUNAR

The 32-bit remakes change so many aspects, both for the better and the worse, that makes it hard to pin down a definitive version.

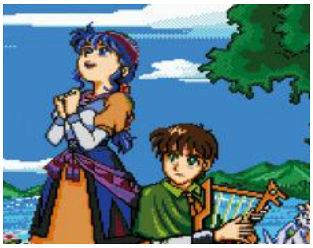
Grindery, a mechanical castle with treads that can destroy nearly anything just by rolling over it.

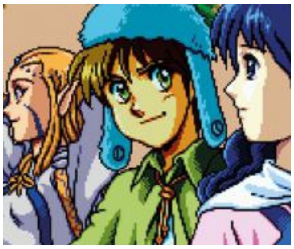
The battle system initially seems like *Final Fantasy*'s, with characters on the right side of the screen and enemies on the left. But it's actually a little more complex, since the field is actually divided into invisible hexagons. Each character can move a certain number of spaces, and act a certain number of times. This means slower characters might waste a turn trying to get to a foe on the opposite side of the field, while a faster one might be able to attack a nearby enemy twice or more.

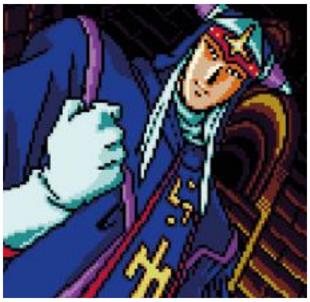
The *Lunar* series began as a joint project between two companies: Studio Alex and Game Arts. Studio Alex was a production company started by Kazunari Tomi, a developer who had previously created the *Mugen no Shinzou* PC RPG series in the mid-'80s while working at XtalSoft, before moving onto a brief stint at Falcom to work on *Star Trader* and *Dinosaur*. Game Arts was previously known mostly for PC titles like the mecha action game *Thexder* and the space shoot-'em-up *Silpheed*, but had begun to dabble in console development with the NES RPG *Faria* and the Genesis action game *Alisia Dragoon*. The character designs were provided by Toshiyuki Kubooka, the animation director of works like *Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water*.

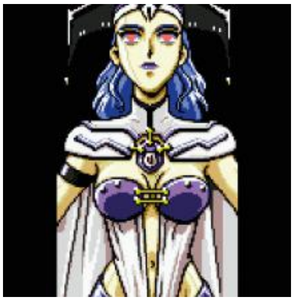
There are actually four completely different versions of *Lunar*. The initial SEGA CD version is subtitled *The Silver Star*. The 32-bit versions, released on the PlayStation and Saturn, are both called *Silver Star Story*, and have completely different graphics, complete with anime FMV, as well a new soundtrack by Noriyuki Iwadare, one of the composers of the SEGA CD game. There are many substantial changes, particularly to the story, with the main difference being that Luna stays with the party for quite a while, whereas she leaves the adventure fairly early on in the original version. Random battles are also replaced with visible encounters, plus there is level scaling for boss battles.

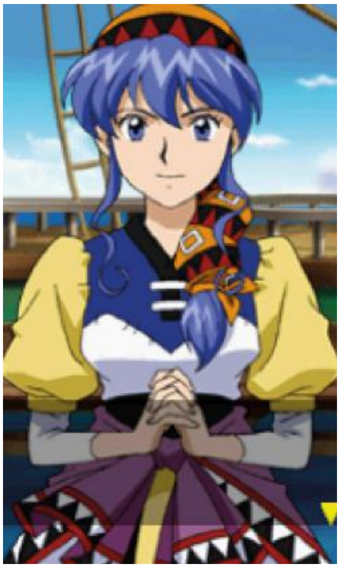
The Game Boy Advance version is called *Lunar Legend*, but being a portable cartridge game, it's missing the cinematic elements and voice acting, it condenses certain plot elements, and it has a weak translation. The PlayStation Portable version, *Silver Star Harmony*, has completely redone sprites and maps that are significantly smaller than before, though the constant loading when switching screens and the dreadfully slow battle system ruin the pacing. The translation is still good, redone by XSeed. Opinions differ as to whether the original SEGA CD or its 32-bit remakes are superior, since they're so drastically different, but either of these beat the portable releases.



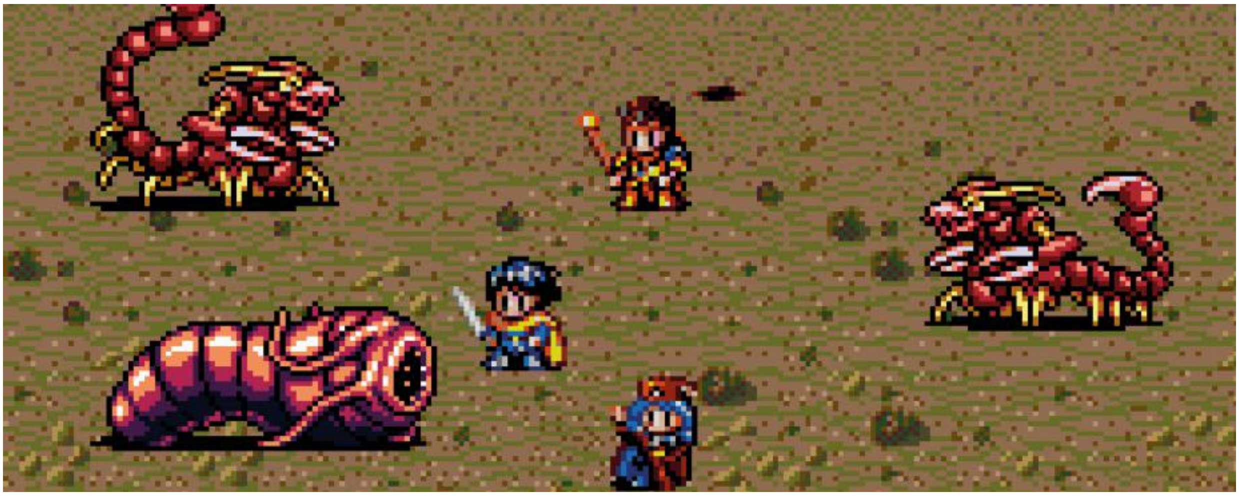






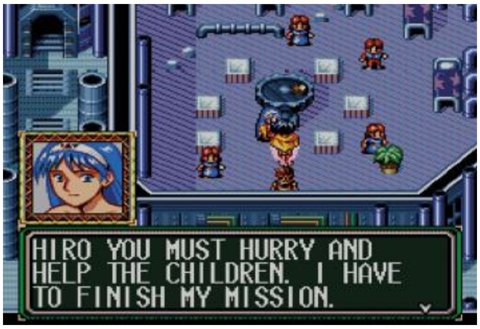


The arresting character designs play a big part in *Lunar*'s appeal. Pictured far and middle left are shots from the SEGA CD opening; on the right is a dialogue portrait of Luna from the PSP version.



Lunar: Eternal Blue

Developer: Game Arts/Studio Alex | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SCD, SAT, PS1



HIRO YOU MUST HURRY AND HELP THE CHILDREN. I HAVE TO FINISH MY MISSION.

Lunar: Eternal Blue takes place 1000 years after the original, and stars young Hiro, an archaeologist fascinated with the stories of ages past. During an expedition, he meets a strange woman named Lucia, who predicts great danger for the world of Lunar, and demands to speak with Althena. They venture to the holy city of Pentagulia in search of the Goddess, where they learn that there is something amiss with the Althena who currently rules the world. Due to the time span, it's not immediately clear how the two games connect. However, the links eventually unfold, as you explore familiar cities, and a few unexpected faces show up too. It's fascinating to see how these places have changed as the world dealt with the consequences of the first game.

Eternal Blue improves on practically every facet of the original. The visuals make better use of the Genesis' limited palette, there's much more voice acting, and the cutscenes are not only more plentiful, but far better animated. The characters are, again, pretty fun, with many of them having close ties to the villains, giving them stronger character arcs. Ronfar is a gambling ex-priest, Jean is a skilled fan-dancer, and Lemina is a penny-pinching magician. Ruby, being a flying pink cat (or dragon, rather), occupies the same role as Nall in the original, while Leo is a religious zealot who initially antagonises our heroes but eventually changes sides. Familiar faces from the previous game return in surprising ways, as Nall has somehow taken human form and Ghaleon seems to have reformed his ways (and is also still alive despite the centuries-long gap). Hiro and Lucia's dynamic is particularly sweet – at the outset, Lucia cannot be controlled in combat. But at a certain point in the story, she learns to trust Hiro, and thus the player, and allows herself to be commanded. The ending is positive, but bittersweet; however, an Epilogue is then unlocked, leading to a few more adventures and one the most heartwarming finales in any JRPG. Overall, it's a more mature game, but as a result, it feels like it's missing the original's lighthearted sense of adventure.

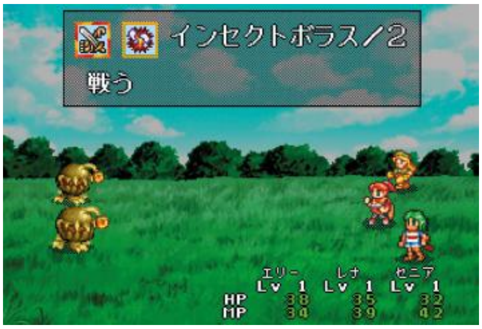
The battle system remains mostly unchanged, with the only major difference being the magic experience system, allowing you to improve your special attacks as you see fit. However, the English localisation requires that you spend these every time you save the game, increasing the need for grinding. Other balancing changes make it harder than it needs to be, which was a trademark issue with Working Designs games.

There is only one remake of *Eternal Blue*, released for the Saturn and PlayStation. As with *Silver Star Story*, this changed the graphics and removed random encounters. But rather than adding things, this one instead cuts out a lot, including shortening many dungeons and ditching some plot elements. The SEGA CD version could be brutally difficult, and while this one is easier, it still feels like too much was chopped out. At least you no longer need to use magic experience to save.

This *Lunar* sequel is better in most ways than the original – larger game world, more intricate story, tightened battle system – and yet it's just not quite as fun.

Mahou Gakuen Lunar

Developer: Game Arts/Studio Alex | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): GG, SAT



Mahou Gakuen Lunar ("Magical School Lunar") focuses on the city of Vane, which floats through the sky on a magical island, and is home to a prestigious magical academy. The main characters are Ellie and Lena, two rural girls whose lives are changed when they're chosen to enrol in the school. Outside of taking place in the same world, it's a prequel, and connections to the original *Lunar* games are tenuous, so it's more of a fun little side story.

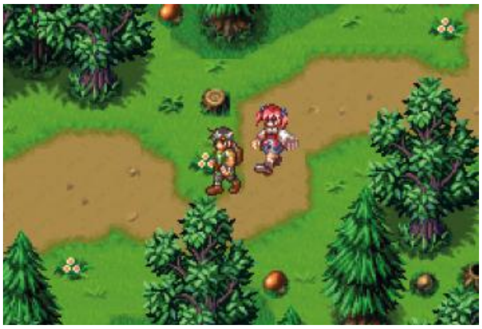
It was originally released on the Game Gear in 1996, subtitled *Samposuru Gakuen* ("Strolling School"), as a way to play a *Lunar* game on the go. But being on an 8-bit, cartridge-based machine, it's lacking the voices and cutscenes of the SEGA CD games, plus the simple visuals and first-person battle scenes make it feel more like a *Dragon Quest* game. So the next year, a remake was released on the Saturn, with completely redone graphics, plenty of anime FMV and voice acting, and a brand new soundtrack by Noriyuki Iwadare. And while it uses the same scenario, the script is greatly expanded, and the content is substantially different. The battle system is similar to that in the 16-bit games, though it removes the movement-based elements. Unfortunately, it's completely ruined by the absurdly high encounter rate: you can't go more than a few steps without being dragged into a random battle.

The game was passed over for localisation, since Working Designs just didn't feel it was very good. Outside of the repetitive combat, the story is simple but funny, and it's unusual to see an RPG of this era with a predominantly female cast (though a few boys join in later on).

This spinoff has the feel of *Lunar* down pat, but the Saturn version is absolutely ruined by an insane random encounter rate.

Lunar: Dragon Song

Developer: Japan Art Media | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): DS



The *Lunar* series was in limbo for quite a while, due to legal disputes between Studio Alex and Game Arts, stemming from development difficulties with the Saturn version of *Mahou Gakuen Lunar*. Studio Alex eventually went out of business, and the series was resurrected with this prequel, *Lunar: Dragon Song* (also known as *Lunar: Genesis* in Japan and Europe). The hero is a delivery boy named Jian, who must fight against the encroaching menace of the Vile Tribe. He's joined by a few friends, one of whom is, not shockingly, a reincarnation of the Goddess Althena.

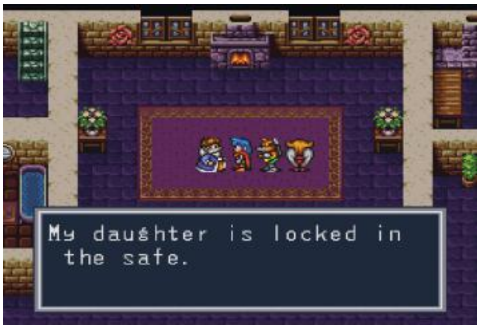
Although *Lunar* fans wanted a follow-up to *Lunar Eternal Blue*, this was a real monkey's paw, because almost everything about it is terrible. The story is rote and the writing is awful, lacking the personality and humour the series was known for under Working Designs. The character designs recall the 16-bit games, but aren't half as interesting; very little of it feels connected to the world in the previous games. *Mahou Gakuen Lunar* had major problems, but it still felt like a *Lunar* game at its core; this one doesn't feel like anything except a disappointment.

But even worse is that it's just filled with baffling design decisions. Combat is achingly slow by default, requiring a triple-speed button to make battles run at a reasonable pace. It's also braindead, since you can't even target your enemies. For some reason, you need to choose either experience points or items after battle, rather than getting both. And for some insane reason, you lose HP if you run around the maps, forcing you to trudge very slowly across the boring dungeons. There's nothing good to say about it.

***Lunar: Dragon Song* is one of the worst JRPGs of its era, as it's not only completely disappointing for series fans, but is just filled with baffling design decisions.**

Breath of Fire

Developer: Capcom | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SNES, GBA



My daughter is locked in the safe.

While they had a few RPGs under their belt in the 8-bit era, Capcom started their own franchise in earnest with *Breath of Fire* on the SNES. Each of the five entries stars a boy named Ryu, who can turn into a dragon, and a winged girl named Nina, though they are technically different characters in each instalment. The rest of the cast typically consists of other anthropomorphic creatures. Key staff include producer Tokuro Fujiwara and lead designer Yoshinori Kawano.

The story of the first *Breath of Fire* is a rather simplistic affair. Taking control of a blue-haired young man named Ryu, the player experiences a rather by-the-numbers tale involving the main character's sister being abducted by the Dark Dragon Empire, because the two of them are among the last of the Light Dragon clan, and Ryu's subsequent globe-spanning journey to save her. Along the way, various demi-human allies will join Ryu's quest for their own reasons, among whom the highlights are the princess Nina and the sultry half-serpent sorceress Deis. While the game has no shortage of set pieces, few ever really distinguish themselves as particularly interesting, save a cameo from *Street Fighter II*'s Chun-Li.

The combat, displayed from an isometric perspective, is the game's high point. Ryu himself has the ability to turn into a dragon once the fight has started, making him immensely powerful with few weaknesses, various plot items can actually be used in combat, rather than simply existing to take up inventory space, and the party's line-up can be adjusted even mid-battle. Enemy sprites are animated, plus they have visible health bars that, while not displaying numbers, provide a fair idea of how tough they are. However, just about every boss enemy's life bar is a lie, as an empty one just means the boss is about to get a "second wind", which is a missed opportunity for them to pull out all the stops. Instead they simply have more health than the game tells the player.

Just about every character is able to perform some kind of action while on the overworld or within a dungeon, such as Ryu being able to fish, while the archer Bo can use his bow to hunt for game. However, the rather high encounter rate with enemies can limit your chance to use these.

While an entirely serviceable first entry in the series, and released to considerable success in Japan, *Breath of Fire*'s notations of distinction fail to elevate it above mere novelty. Capcom's inexperience with regard to translating and localising text-heavy RPGs led to a collaboration with Squaresoft, of *Final Fantasy* fame, with Ted Woolsey handling the project. Due to the nature of the game's programming, many names needed to be changed, creating inconsistencies with later series entries. A Game Boy Advance re-release in 2001 managed some quality-of-life adjustments to reduce grinding, at the cost of a washed-out colour palette and poorly adapted audio.

Capcom's 16-bit franchise began here, and while it's arguably nothing fantastic, it sets down the basics for later titles. Plus, dragons are cool!

Breath of Fire II

Developer: Capcom | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SNES, GBA

Capcom's first entry in the RPG arena was broadly met with success, so naturally the effort continued, in the form of a sequel. Most of the development team remained the same, with producer Tokuro Fujiwara and lead designer Yoshinori Kawano reprising their roles, but a new team handling the art and music. The end result was the most fascinating entry for a wide variety of reasons.

The game's hero is a child called Ryu (signalling the start of the series' tradition of reusing the name), who begins his adventure by taking a nap outside his village, then returning to find that no-one knows him or his family, and his father has seemingly been replaced by another man. In the evening, he meets an orphan of dubious morals named Bow, who suggests that since there's nothing for him here, they should leave. Years later, the two have become mercenaries, but things become complicated when Bow is framed for a crime he didn't commit. Ryu sets out to clear his friend's name, and in the process, learn the truth of his own heritage.

Once again using a wide cast of varying animal-like races, including Katt the cat/tiger-girl and Jean the frog, *Breath of Fire II* largely improves upon the low points of its predecessor, while maintaining the same notes of distinction. Combat is much tighter, and your allies personal abilities have more satisfying usability. The score is more memorable, complete with the same sort of electric guitars found on the *Mega Max X* soundtrack, and the cast feels more fleshed out. New additions include building a town and inviting various homeless people to move in, with various tenants providing different results, from useless squatters to shopkeepers and people who provide permanent upgrades for the party. Another notable mechanic is the clan of Shamans, who can fuse with the party members, enhancing their stats or even transforming them into different beings with their own unique actions; however this is implemented in a rather glitchy manner and can lead to many moments of varying frustration.

***Breath of Fire* finds its voice with this second entry, even if it is muddled by a poor English translation.**

Without question, the most memorable thing about *Breath of Fire II* is the writing, which in the Western release is simultaneously the best and worst thing about it. The narrative covers heavy subject matter and rather challenging themes, and is famous for being an SNES game that not only retains religious iconography, but revolves around a religion as a central point of the narrative. On the other hand, the translation was handled in-house, and is one of the most hilariously terrible translations ever put on a cartridge. Yet despite this, the core of the narrative shines through: a captivating story, with many emotional moments and characters that leave a lasting impression.

Like the original, *Breath of Fire II* received an enhanced GBA port. It added some new splash art, quadrupled the money and experience the player gains, but oddly kept the same broken-as-hell translation, for reasons unknown.

Breath of Fire III

Developer: Capcom | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1, PSP

Three years after the release of *Breath of Fire II*, Capcom got around the releasing the next sequel. Pretty much only the series artist, Tatsuya Yoshikawa, had reprised his role; Makoto Ikehara had both taken the director's chair and written the new game, *Breath of Fire III*.

The story centres around a young boy named Ryu (of course!), who is able to transform into a dragon. He is an orphan and is befriended by Teepo, another orphan, and Rei, a vagabond thief. Through their efforts to make a name for themselves, they earn the ire of a criminal syndicate that sends hitmen after them. Overwhelmed, the three of them are separated, leaving Ryu with nowhere to call home. In the course of his struggles, Ryu will make other friends, including the Windian Princess Nina, the Mad Scientist Momo, and the enigmatic Guardian Garr. Their adventures will take them in search of Ryu's missing friends and the truth of the last 1000 years.

The visual stylings of the game involve an odd hybridisation of CG landscapes, CG effects, character sprites, and environmental sprites. This is all set up on an isometric grid for movement, though the player is not able to freely rotate the camera. Instead the player can pan about 30° to the left or right by means of a button, which will shift objects about and stretch textures in a hideous manner. The music, composed by Yoshino Aoki and Akari Kaida (who later worked on assorted *Mega Man Battle Network* games) is also unusual, suggesting jazzy aspirations but not really holding that theme with any cohesion. Several pieces sound like they're missing beats or instruments, and while there are a few stand-out tracks and the credits feature full vocals, the overall result is divisive.

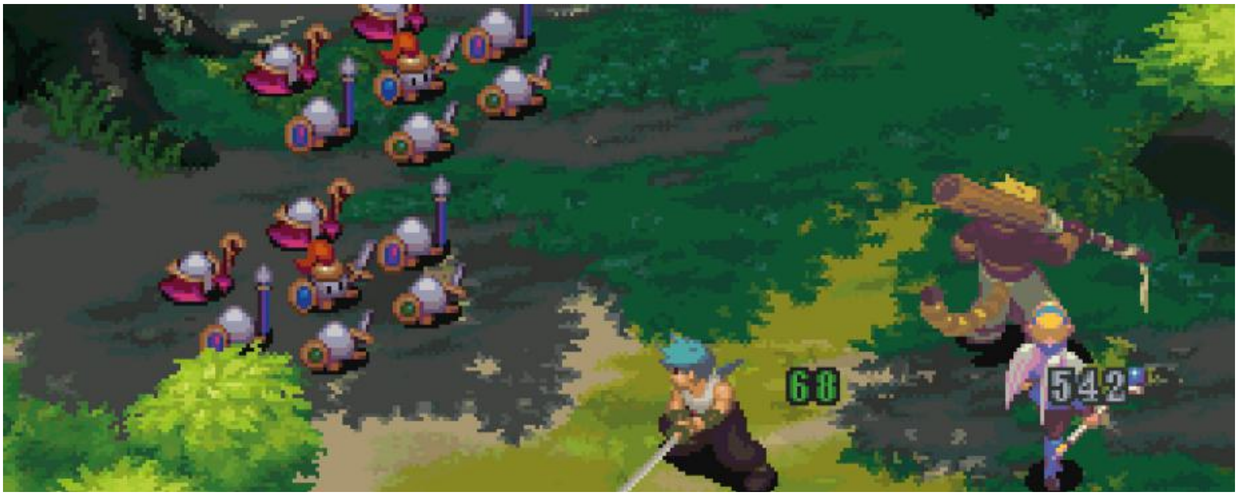
TankBot
Thrasher
Rei HP AP 62 238
Ryu HP AP 137 267
Garr HP AP 43 389

Mechanically, *Breath of Fire III* is a fairly straightforward turn-based combat affair with a few attempts at spicing things up, like the ability to study under Masters to change how your character grows, or to learn enemy attack skills by watching them in action. The execution of these novelties is a bit wonky. The most notable inclusion, however, is the Dragon Gene system, which involves finding various aspected dragon attributes and being able to play Build-A-Wyrm with Ryu. This can offer some variety, though a curious design choice makes Ryu the primary healer of the party, which limits the opportunities to use this skill. The game is remembered for aspects like the customisable Faerie Village, which is a development of *Breath of Fire II*'s Township, and an aggressive dolphin that speaks in such a strong Australian accent (Kansai in Japanese) that the game offers to translate it for the player.

Breath of Fire III is odd in spots, but it's still a decent title, and was moderately successful. In 2006, it received a PSP port that expanded the aspect ratio and fleshed out the fishing mini-game, though only initially released in Europe and Japan.

PlayStation
BREATH OF FIRE III
CAPCOM

There are some growing pains associated with moving to the PlayStation, and the music is certainly unusual, but *Breath of Fire III* still maintains the series core identity.



Breath of Fire IV

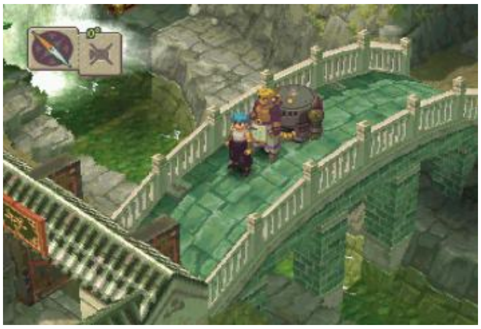
Developer: Capcom | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS1, WIN

Breath of Fire IV features an interesting dual-narrative structure, following the journeys of not only Ryu and his friends, but also a demi-god named Fou-Lu; both he and Ryu are capable of transforming into dragons. At various points in the game the perspective will shift from Ryu's group, as they try to navigate a messy political situation and are forced onward by forces outside of their control, to Fou-Lu, who has awoken 600 years after sealing himself away and is making his way to the imperial capital that he himself founded. The player controls both of these efforts, and learns how the two are connected, while separately exploring the positive and negative aspects of humanity. Amusing characters here include Ershin, an eccentric robot-type creature (though there's a person inside), Scias the samurai sheep dog, and Ursula the pistol-wielder.

Mechanically, *Breath of Fire IV* is similar to its predecessor, but with a greater degree of polish. Encounters are again turn-based, but for the first time since the first game, the reserve roster can be tagged in mid-combat. The dragon transformations are streamlined and better realised. Enemy skills can be learned mid-combat once again, but this time with the Defend command, so that the effort feels more like a tactical decision than a waste of time. The Master system returns with greater clarity and more usability. In addition to this, there's a combo system that allows for bonus damage, given certain conditions, and weapons that strike more than once or hit all targets, giving tactical weight to their use. However, outside of battle, the characters field skills are gone, so the dungeons are less puzzle-based.

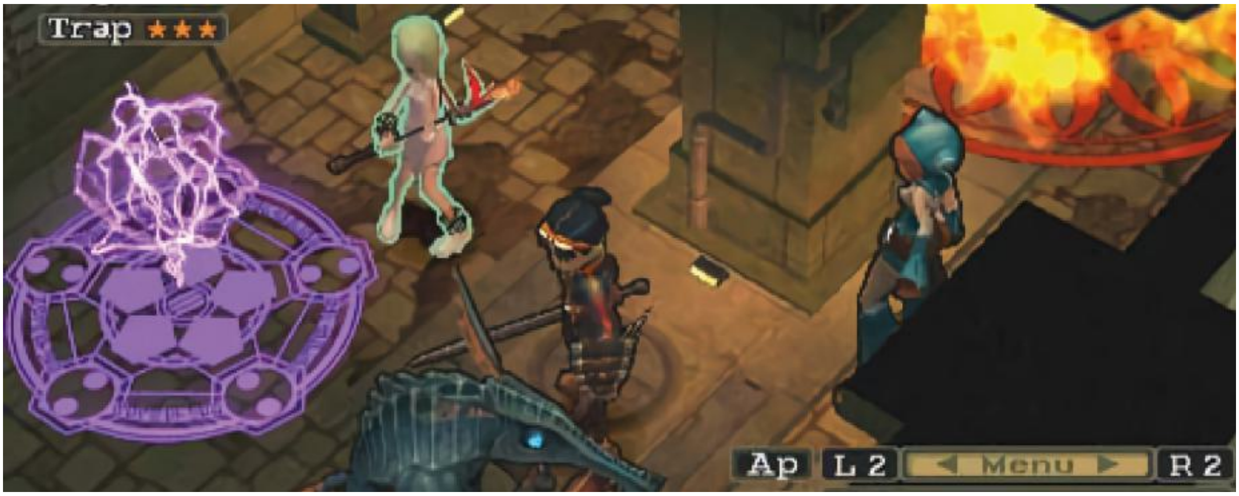
The artists had a better grip on the technology with this entry, so it looks and feels much better. Certain areas can still be troublesome to navigate, but this is still a fantastic-looking game that's aged more gracefully than many other PlayStation RPGs. The visual stylings carry the East and West themes in the game well. The sprite artwork and animation are also absolutely gorgeous. Musically, the game features a blend of Western orchestra and Indonesian instrumentation, with the former being associated with Ryu's group, and the latter with Fou-Lu, for most of the game; with the back end of the game, the two are switched, as the groups come closer together. The introductory cinematic sequence is also one of the most striking on the system, although it's the only instance of FMV in the game.

Breath of Fire IV was released to fairly nominal success, with most recognising its improvements over the third game, but not finding much that made it truly stand out as a late PlayStation entry. The game was localised in the West with interesting priorities, featuring fairly strong censorship regarding violence and alcoholism, and also leaving the dialogue in the intro in unsubtitled Japanese. Despite this, *Breath of Fire IV* is a very solid entry in the series, and it's difficult to find anything particularly out of place in it.



BREATH OF FIRE IV
PlayStation
CAPCOM

The 2D characters on 3D backgrounds look was common in PlayStation RPGs, but *Breath of Fire IV* is easily the best-looking of them all.



Breath of Fire: Dragon Quarter

Developer: Capcom | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): PS2

The *Breath of Fire* series was generally of pretty decent quality, but it was hardly innovative. That all changed with the fifth entry, *Dragon Quarter*, so much so that the roman numeral was ditched for the English release.

The story is set around a kilometre below the surface in a massive subterranean bunker. Concepts such as "sky" are spoken of as mythical, and no one dares go to the surface for fear of whatever led to its destruction making its way down. Social status is determined by one's D-Ratio, and those with worse D-Ratios are forced to live on the lower levels of the complex, with a significantly worse quality of life. This game's Ryu is a boy with a D-Ratio of 1/8192, the lowest of the low. He's part of a security force known as the Rangers, alongside his friend Bosch. In the course of his journey, Ryu will meet Nina, a little girl with strange wings who can't speak, as well as Lin, a cat-lady and anti-government resistance fighter who insists that Nina must be taken to the surface, or else she will die.

Wildly departing from series norms, *Dragon Quarter* features no overworld nor any sense of freedom. Mechanically, it's a corridor crawl through a series of dirty, dingy, and mostly abandoned industrial sites in the underground. Enemies can be seen walking around, and if the player uses their weapon against an enemy, the point-character will gain an extra turn. Combat takes place at the exact location of the initial engagement; all entities make use of an Active Point system to freely move around and perform attacks in highly tactical engagements, SRPG style. Each of the three members has a distinct role in combat – Ryu is a mêlée fighter, Nina can set traps for enemies, and Lin has projectile weapons – and using their skills together effectively is the key to success. Players can make use of traps outside of combat to weaken or avoid foes.

The real enemy, however, is attrition. Resources are limited – Capcom seems to have taken inspiration from the "survival" elements of games like *Resident Evil*. Plus, there's a D-Counter that counts up constantly, and when it hits 100%, the game is over, and you must restart the whole adventure from scratch. When running around, it fills up very slowly, but activating Ryu's dragon powers increases it tremendously, ensuring that you only use them in the most crucial moments. The quest is fairly short – it can be beaten in under ten hours – but, predicting that gamers may have trouble with these aspects, it uses something called a Scenario Overlay System, which lets you restart the game while carrying over some elements, plus it adds in extra cutscenes on subsequent replays.

The atmosphere is impeccable, thanks to Hitoshi Sakimoto's brilliant score. It's such an oppressive and intimidating game, and so different from its predecessors, that fans largely rejected it, spelling an end to the series save for a Japan-only mobile game. It's unfortunate, because in spite of all this, it's one of the best RPGs on the PS2.

PlayStation.2
BREATH OF FIRE
DRAGON QUARTER
CAPCOM

***Dragon Quarter* tends to be disliked by series fans, because it really is drastically different from everything before it, but on its own terms, it's one of the best RPGs on the PlayStation 2.**

Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars

Developer: Nintendo/Square | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SNES

Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars is a dream-team collaboration between Nintendo and Square, being an interpretation of the *Mario* world and characters by the creators of *Final Fantasy*. It also allows a glimpse into the Mushroom Kingdom, which had not yet really been examined outside of non-video game media like cartoons and comic books. The story starts with Princess Peach being kidnapped by King Bowser, as usual, except their battle is interrupted by a gigantic sentient sword called Exor. It shatters the Star Road, scattering the seven stars to the far reaches of the kingdom, and Mario is put in charge of getting them back. There are five playable characters altogether, including Mario, as Princess Peach isn't a damsel in distress for long, and joins the team; you even make amends with Bowser to fight against your common foe. Original characters include Mallow, a cloud boy who thinks he's a frog, and Geno, an enchanted doll.

As a compromise between the side-scrolling platforming of a standard *Mario* game and the overhead perspective of a typical role-playing game, *Super Mario RPG* utilises an isometric perspective, which allows Mario to run and jump around. Floating treasure chests must be hit like question mark blocks, and there are often simple platforming challenges. Enemies are visible on the map, and you can find star power-ups to become invincible and ram right through them. The graphics are all CG-rendered, as this look was popular in the mid-'90s, as evidenced by the success of *Donkey Kong Country*. However, the style doesn't feel all that dated here, due to the detailed designs and bright colours. Yoko Shimomura's bouncy soundtrack lends an atmosphere that feels both consistent with Nintendo's titles yet wholly original, and the dialogue is routinely funny, enough to cover for the rather simple story.

The combat introduces a reflex-based system where if you hit the button at the exact moment before an attack hits, you'll perform an extra attack for added damage (if you're on the offensive) or block (if you're defending). It's a clever way for turn-based battles to feel more interactive than they usually are, one which has been adapted by several subsequent games, including the later *Mario* RPG entries. Magic and special moves also limited by the size of a shared pool of flowers, which you increase by hunting around the areas. Upon levelling up, you can also choose an added bonus for strength, HP, or special attack. The game is really suited to beginners, especially as enemies can drop HP-restoring items in combat, and curatives may sometimes be used for free without consuming them.

Super Mario RPG does lack the grand sense of adventure found in other SNES RPGs, and mechanically it is a little simple. Plus, later *Mario* RPGs, like Intelligent Systems' *Paper Mario* games or Alphadream's *Mario & Luigi* series, offer various improvements on the formula. But it's still a fun, clever, and engaging title, one worthy of these high-quality developers.

Super Mario RPG
Legend of the Seven Stars
Super Nintendo

The computer-rendered graphics definitely date *Super Mario RPG* to the mid-'90s, but it still looks pretty good nowadays.

Paper Mario

Developer: Intelligent Systems | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): N64

After Square's *Super Mario RPG* proved to be a success, Nintendo went back to the idea of a *Mario* RPG during the N64 era, and produced one of the system's most memorable games with Intelligent Systems, the developers of the *Fire Emblem* and *Advance Wars* strategy games. While the *Paper Mario* series' third entry was morphed into a bizarre platformer, *Super Paper Mario*, the original, and its first sequel, *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door*, remain some of Nintendo's most beloved games and have an enthusiastic fanbase.

Their graphic design plays a big part in this. Similar to Sony's *Parappa the Rapper*, the characters are all 2D paper-thin illustrations, presenting the world as a story book or stage play in which everything is a cardboard or paper prop. It's bright, colourful, fits the *Mario* universe better than the CG rendering in the SNES game, and it's aged far better than nearly any other N64 game. The viewpoint is still a side-scrolling perspective, and there are some simple platforming elements, so it feels more authentic than Square's effort as well.

Another major reason for the series' popularity is that it made turn-based combat fun and engaging again for non-RPG-playing audiences. The key to this was taking the action command system from *Super Mario RPG* and re-contextualising it into a less RPG/fantasy sort of scenario. Instead of simply pressing a button at the right time to increase damage output, every move you can use has a special input. If you have Mario attack with a jump, you time a button press to when you hit the enemy for extra damage, as in an RPG. However, his secondary basic move, using the hammer, has you hold back the control stick for a set amount of time before releasing it for large damage. Every single skill functions like this, with its own special input to be learned, in order to make the most of it.

Paper Mario's story is pretty standard, with Bowser as the big bad, but he gets to be an actual threat for once: the game starts with him stealing the Star Rod (not to be confused with the star rod from the *Kirby* games) and using its magic to become invincible. The rest of the journey involves fighting his lackeys and gathering star spirits to gain the power to fight back, meeting wacky characters who join your side. The game has strong writing, both progressing the dramatic plot and keeping you chuckling with a flood of well-timed gags and puns. Mario is typically accompanied by a partner in battle, generally an enemy character given a friendly personality (no Luigi, oddly, though he does make brief appearances), like the helpful Goombario, a Mario-worshipping Goomba in a blue hat; the haughty Bow, princess of the Boo ghosts; and the punkish Lakitu named Lakilester.

Paper Mario is an excellent game, especially for an RPG-starved platform like the N64, though by most metrics, the sequel is slightly better, and is remembered a bit more fondly.

RPGs were extremely scarce on the Nintendo 64, and *Paper Mario* frankly blows stuff like *Quest 64* right out of the water.

Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door

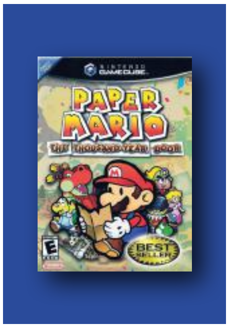
Developer: Intelligent Systems | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): GC

The second *Paper Mario* game, subtitled *The Thousand-Year Door*, is similar to the first game, with some obvious aesthetic improvements. Being a GameCube game, the graphics are higher resolution and much crisper, the frame rate is smoother and the soundtrack sounds sharper. This is one beautiful-looking and -sounding game.

The story is a bit more involved this time around. It involves you fighting an evil group of bandits who are after a mysterious treasure hidden behind the titular Thousand-Year Door. The adventure begins in Rogueport, a scummy port town that has a gallows in its town square, because of course it would. Goofy scenarios abound, like coming across a socially-awkward Koopa whose home is decorated with Princess Peach posters, and fighting a Hulk Hogan-inspired golden bird that wrestles. The partner characters are even goofier than before, like the super-chipper treasure hunter Goombella, the dopey Koops, or the flirty mouse Ms. Mowz. The game is also notable for having a canonical trans character in Vivian the ghost (in Japanese versions, though not elsewhere). Regular characters have their own unique bits, like Luigi, who goes off on an adventure of his own and ends up getting a greatly exaggerated version of it published. Peach gets kidnapped but ends up attempting to escape with the help of a computer, which falls in love with her. Bowser even returns as a comic-relief character, becoming aware of the plot late on, and wanting to interrupt it out of sheer pettiness.

The battle system has been expanded, with even more varied inputs, taking everything that worked originally and making it much larger in scale. There's a new audience system, in which the proper inputs excite the audience to grant star power for more powerful skills and even net you useful items, and vice versa if you flub attacks. It also utilises the "paper" theme by turning it into an exploration mechanic, letting Mario get folded into different shapes, like a paper aeroplane, to make progress. Amusingly, every new ability is presented as a "curse" from an evil being, but it actually just ends up being something super-useful.

8/ 10
12/ 15
×38
×998
18/ 25



The Thousand-Year Door is a brilliant game, and easily the best RPG on the GameCube. Alas, many subsequent games drastically scaled back the RPG elements, though *Super Paper Mario* (Wii) is still worth checking out for its surprisingly complex and entertaining villain, even if it's more of a platformer. *Sticker Star* (3DS) and *Color Splash* (Wii U) have been met with more mixed responses, having much more generic stories at their centre and questionable mechanical changes, especially *Color Splash*'s focus on cards. While reviews were okay, the sales were not great, and the fanbase has been visibly upset by these deviations. There was also a crossover with the portable *Mario & Luigi* games, but this was based more on that series' mechanics than what those *Paper Mario* had developed.

The visuals are beautiful, the music is fun, and the writing is legitimately hilarious. The GameCube wasn't much of an RPG machine, but this is one of the standout titles of the era.

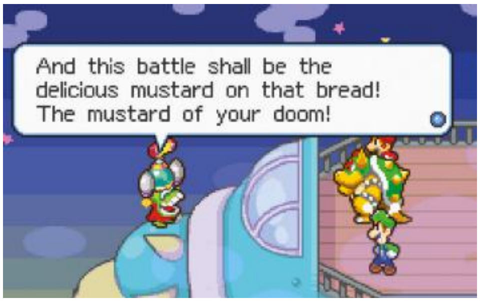
Mario & Luigi (series)

Developer: AlphaDream | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): GBA, DS, 3DS

The *Mario & Luigi* series is a strange one, the tone set by its bizarre first game. If *Paper Mario* was all about whimsy, then *Mario & Luigi* was like some experimental '90s Nickelodeon cartoon, complete with a few adult jokes and a zany, absurd tone. The franchise has been in the hands of AlphaDream, rather than Intelligent Systems, since its inception, and they decided to take the *Mario* RPG concept and go in a direction far removed from that of all previous efforts. The end result is a series known less for its base mechanics and more for each game's new gimmick, and the ridiculous scenarios they keep coming up with.

The first game, *Superstar Saga* on the Game Boy Advance, takes the plumbers to the new Beanbean Kingdom, a new, wacky country terrorised by evil witch Cackletta and her henchman Fawful, who's become a breakout star in the franchise and got promoted to lead villain in the third game. They also have the honour of being *Mario* villains who have been canonically killed off, a rarity for the larger franchise. The game uses a turn-based system, but has you controlling Mario and Luigi at the same time, using the A and B buttons respectively, with a huge focus on dodging and countering enemy attacks. However, this game also introduces powerful Bros. Attacks that the duo can do together. Naturally, the whole game is based around action commands. It was a real showstopper for the already wildly popular GBA, and that a franchise would spiral out of this hit was not in any doubt.

The DS sequel, *Partners in Time*, expands on the formula by having you also control baby Mario and Luigi on the other screen, though this added little. The game also suffered greatly in the American release because bosses were given higher life HP counts, making these battles a slog. You can even run out of Bros. Attacks, now turned into items, in the final battle, simply because the boss' health is so vast. The most notable thing about *Partners in Time* is the messed up story, in which mushroom-like aliens invade the kingdom to harvest life energy from Toads, put it into Alien-style nests, and transform Yoshis into mutated cyborg slaves. It's really, really weird, to say the least. It also feels a bit too much like the first game, while the new ideas here half formed and focuses on classic, established characters instead of giving us more new faces. It just feels like a step backwards, and AlphaDream aimed to correct this with the third game.



And this battle shall be the
delicious mustard on that bread!
The mustard of your doom!

Bowser's Inside Story is a return to form. Here, Bowser is tricked by Fawful into eating a magical mushroom, which causes him to suck up things like a vacuum cleaner. Mario, Luigi and pals end up getting stuck in his body, and part of the game involves navigating his innards while microscopic in size. In some parts of the game, you control Bowser, who can suck up bad guys into himself, and then have Mario & Luigi fight them in his stomach. Bowser can also turn giant for certain boss battles, requiring that you turn the DS on its side to pummel baddies.

MARIO & LUIGI
SUPERSTAR SAGA
GAME BOY ADVANCE
E

While the visual style is quite different from, and less distinctive than, that of the other *Mario* RPG games, it still inherits their penchant for goofy characters. Fawful for *Smash*!

A
B
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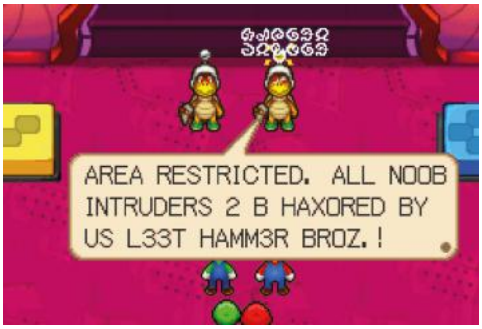

AREA RESTRICTED. ALL NOOB INTRUDERS 2 B HAXORED BY US L33T HAMM3R BROZ.!

MARIO & LUIGI
PARTNERS IN TIME
NINTENDO DS

***Partners in Time* creates some time travel shenanigans by pairing the brothers up with their infant selves.**

It's considered the best game in the series by most fans, and sees the return of both Fawful and the goofier writing style. This also marked Bowser's increasing importance in the franchise, as he ended up becoming a central villain in the next two games, instead of a throwaway joke. It's yet another game that shows off the wildly creative ideas the DS was able to turn into reality, and is easily one of the system's best games.

Dream Team on the 3DS continued this inventive streak, giving Luigi a starring role, as you spend a large chunk of the game exploring his dreams and fighting with an army of Luigis, using the 3DS' tilt controls, which allows for more inventive action commands. The puzzles are also pretty amusing, making use of the dream Luigis in fun ways. *Dream Team* came out during Nintendo's much hyped Year of Luigi promotion, and this is probably the most interesting of the titles that ran with the idea. It also helps that the overlooked plumber got the spotlight for once, after being the butt of everyone's jokes in every previous game.

The last original game in the series is *Paper Jam* for the 3DS, a crossover with the *Paper Mario* series, which feels like a missed opportunity. Very few original characters from either franchise made an appearance, the *Paper Mario* cameos being limited to characters who appeared in the forgettable *Sticker Star*, and little is added mechanically to the base *Mario & Luigi* formula beyond some basic paper transformations, used mainly for puzzles. It got some of the most mixed reviews, not really satisfying fans of either franchise. Out of the whole RPG crossover between two very funny universes defined by large personalities, only Bowser really got any love. It should have been made right after *Thousand-Year Door*, or even *Paper Mario*, but sadly that didn't happen. It's worth noting that this one came out two years after the last game, which hadn't happened since *Partners in Time*'s release, suggesting both of these games were rushed through development.

No original title for this series has come out since, but *Superstar Saga* and *Bowser's Inside Story* each received 3DS remakes, in 2017 and 2019, respectively, each and using an additional mode focused on minion side stories with new unique mechanics. It's a great series overall – even the weakest entries have great comedic scripts and fun base mechanics.

The *Mario & Luigi* games were preceded by a Japan-only GBA RPG from AlphaDream, called *Tomato Adventure*. In this world, there is a land called the Ketchup Kingdom. However, those who don't like tomatoes are forced to live on the outskirts, in a place called Cobore Village, until they change their mind. The hero, a boy named DeMille, is one of these outcasts. However, when his girlfriend Patharan is kidnapped by King Abira, he must journey through the land, and face off against the six Super Kids. The battle system is based around gimmicks, with each piece of equipment requiring some kind of action (hitting a timing bar, mashing buttons, etc.) in order to do extra damage. It's a bit simple, but it's all incredibly goofy, in both its dialogue and visual style.

Both the silly storyline and the reflex-based battle system were carried forward to the *Mario & Luigi* games. One of the key links between all of these titles is Chihiro Fujioka, who began his career as a composer for XtalSoft, working on games like *Lizard*. He eventually joined Square, where he ended up co-directing *Super Mario RPG;* later, he left and joined AlphaDream, where he directed *Tomato Adventure*, and designed several *Mario & Luigi* titles.

***Tomato Adventure* is sort of a prototype for *Mario & Luigi*, having been developed by the same company, and also being a co-production with Nintendo.**

ギミック
アイテム
にげる
デミル
22/22

トマトアドベンチャー

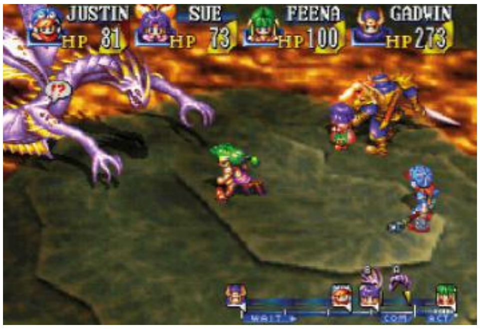
Grandia

Developer: Game Arts | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): SAT, PS1, WIN, NSW

Game Arts found some success with the *Lunar* games, but they also had to share that with their co-producers, Studio Alex. The two eventually had a falling out, which is just as well, considering Game Arts created its own original RPG series, *Grandia*, to succeed it.

Grandia takes place in a world undergoing an industrial revolution, in which the discovery of steam power has allowed for new modes of transportation. The hero, a young boy named Justin, and his friend, a little girl named Sue, dream of adventuring beyond the known world's boundary – which, in this case, is literally a gigantic wall called the End of the World. Joined by a feisty bounty hunter named Feena, they handily cross this barrier, but that's only the beginning, as they discover whole societies on the other side … as well as encountering an evil military organisation, which aims to dig up the remains of ancient civilisations to harness their technology.

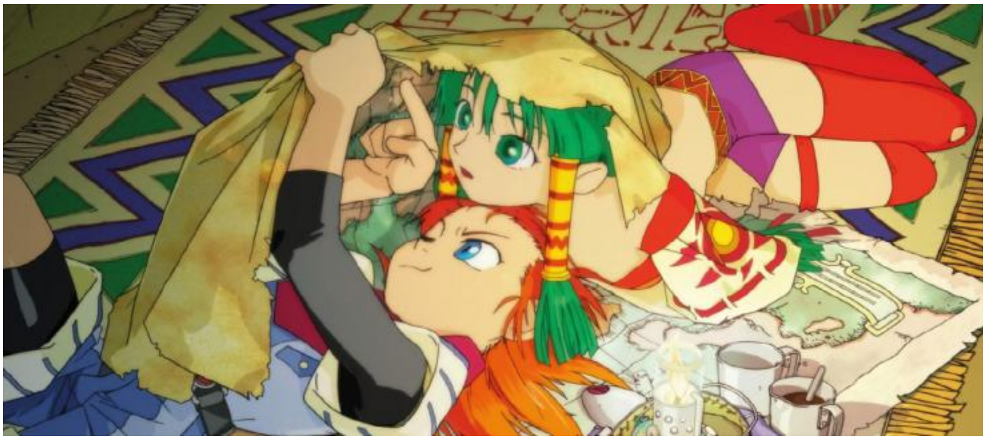
Grandia borrows *Lunar*'s coming-of-age adventure tale, and even snatches some of its broader plot beats. There's also an emphasis on characterisation, especially through a number of mealtime scenes, in which the various characters chat together over food. The English version was translated by Sony, and neither their translation nor their voice acting is on the same level as Working Designs' efforts, but the endearing likeability of the cast still comes across. The visuals are a mixture of 3D polygons and 2D sprites. It looks a little messy, and the camera, as well as the confusing dungeon design, make navigation an extraordinary pain. The soundtrack by Noriyuki Iwadare also shows significant evolution of his skill, especially in his battle tracks.



PlayStation
GRANDIA

Indeed, the combat is the strongest point of every game in the series. Random encounters give way to enemies visible on the field, while the battle system from *Lunar* is evolved by grafting on elements from *Final Fantasy*'s Active Time Battle System. During battle, each character's turn order is depicted on a gauge at the bottom of the screen. The action unfolds in real time, and you're made explicitly aware of your foes' places in the turn queue, allowing you to plot accordingly. The action pauses whenever one of your character's turns comes up, allowing you to make a move. Each character has two primary attacks – a Combo, which consists of multiple powerful attacks, and a Critical, a single, quick attack. There's a short delay between the time when an action is decided and when it's actually executed, indicated on the action gauge. If you manage to hit an enemy with a Critical attack during this small window, you'll stun them and cause them to lose their turn. On the flip side, if you're not paying attention, the enemy can do the same thing to you. There are also a number of character-specific special attacks, as well as magic spells, which are learned by equipping eggs, and strengthened by repeated use. Magic takes even longer to cast than either attack, leaving the user open to assault.

While not directly connected to them, there's a solid argument to be made that *Grandia* is the spiritual successor to the *Lunar* games, with a much better battle system.



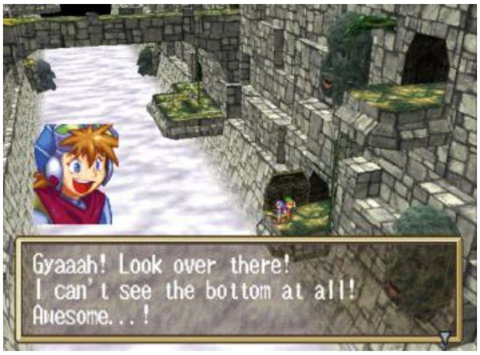
Justin and Feena are a cute romantic couple, and provide a more interesting dynamic than the (largely mute) Alex and Luna do in *Lunar: The Silver Star*.

As a result, each time you pick a command, you have to weigh your decision, be mindful of the speed and range of your attack, and take some risks at every turn. Depending on circumstances, it is possible to emerge from battle completely unscathed, which rewards you with additional experience and a special victory theme. The shaky camera adds to the chaos, zooming around the battlefield and focusing on the most brutal attacks. Crushing sound effects accompany every blow, and slain enemies explode in a mess of coins and shattered polygons. Altogether, it's quite enthralling, definitely an achievement considering that you're still just picking selections from menus.

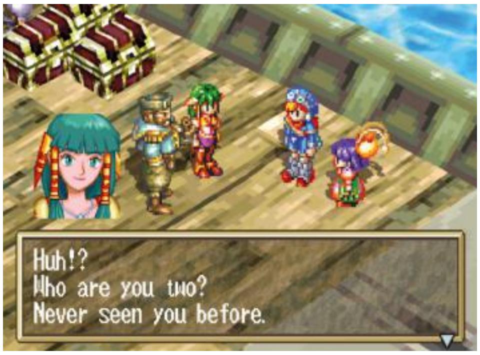
Before its international release, *Grandia* was presented as the SEGA Saturn counterpart to Sony's behemoth, *Final Fantasy VII* on the PlayStation. This was a hugely unfair comparison, because not only are they very different games, *Grandia*'s budget was substantially smaller. It uses two CDs, but the CGI cutscenes aren't particularly impressive. What it does offer over its competition is some fully orchestrated music (only a handful of tracks), plenty of voice acting, and a more charming, much more comprehensible (though more typical) storyline.

Grandia was ported to the PlayStation, on which it was released in English. This version sacrifices some texture detail and other effects only possible on the Saturn, plus it inherits that version's sluggish technical performance. Overall, though, it's still a solid port. What's missing is the *Digital Museum*, a fan disc only released for the Saturn, which includes plenty of supplementary materials, as well as some exclusive dungeons.

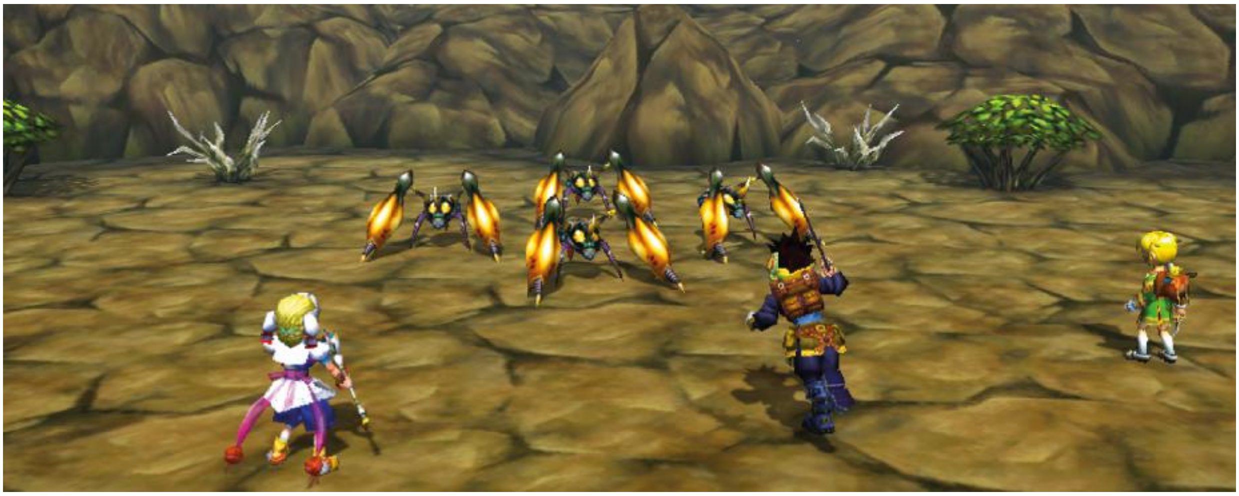
Subsequent *Grandia* games go the *Final Fantasy* route by changing up the setting and characters in each game, with the exception of the Game Boy Color spinoff, subtitled *Parallel Trippers*. Aimed at children, it stars three kids from Japan, who get sucked into the world of *Grandia*, and adventure alongside Justin, Feena, and Sue. Visually, it more closely resembles 8-bit RPGs like *Dragon Quest*, though it tries its best to replicate the flow of the battle system in its bigger brother, if not exactly its intensity. It does feature some puzzle-based dungeons though, as you're allowed to leap up and around obstacles, plus there are tons of playable characters.



Gyaaah! Look over there!
I can't see the bottom at all!
Awesome...!



Huh!?
Who are you two?
Never seen you before.



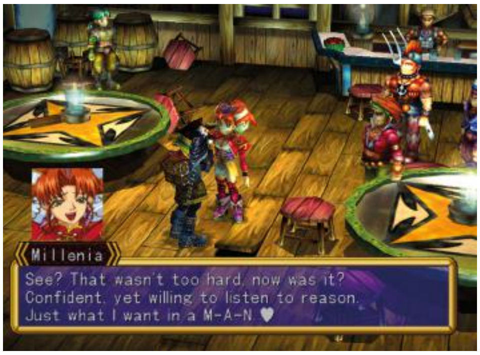
Grandia II

Developer: Game Arts | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): DC, PS2, WIN, NSW

The original *Grandia* is basically a coming-of -age story, but its sequel really ramps up the teenage angst – it's much darker, with an aura of unearned sophistication. The new storyline is completely unrelated to the original: you control a young man named Ryudo, a Geohound (basically a mercenary), given a seemingly straightforward mission to escort a priestess named Elena to a ceremony. Except something goes drastically wrong, and the evil lord Valmar is somehow resurrected, sending his influence all throughout the land. Further, Elena has been possessed, and during the night-time hours, she changes form into a winged demon named Millenia, whose sultriness contrasts strongly with her host's meekness.

Overall, the story only just passes muster, especially as it uses the (by now) hoary old JRPG cliche that "the church was secretly bad all along!" Still, even if that's a well-worn trope, how often do you face off against a super-villain by actually entering into his body? As a result of the less light-hearted story, the characters just don't have the same charm as the original ones – there's a rather obnoxious little kid named Roan, a large beastman named Mareg, and a robot girl named Tio, but no one has the likeability of Justin, Sue, or Feena. While the translation isn't markedly better than the first game's, it does have much better voice acting, with a number of well-known actors. These include Cam Clarke, who helps sell Ryudo's cynical, sarcastic personality, as well as his eventual transformation into an actual hero.

Grandia II is one of the first JRPGs of the Dreamcast/PS2 generation, so it tries its best to show off. The entire game is 3D now, which benefits the battle system the most, as it's even more dramatic than it was before. It tries to integrate FMV effects when casting certain spells, which is probably the most dated-looking aspect of this game. The character models have eyes but no noses or mouths, although they're otherwise finely detailed, and despite the drastic change in tone, the aesthetics still feel uniquely *Grandia.* This applies to Noriyuki Iwadare's soundtrack, which supplies some more excellent battle themes. The orchestral themes from the first game are gone, but instead there are a few vocal songs in a language that was meant to be Portuguese.



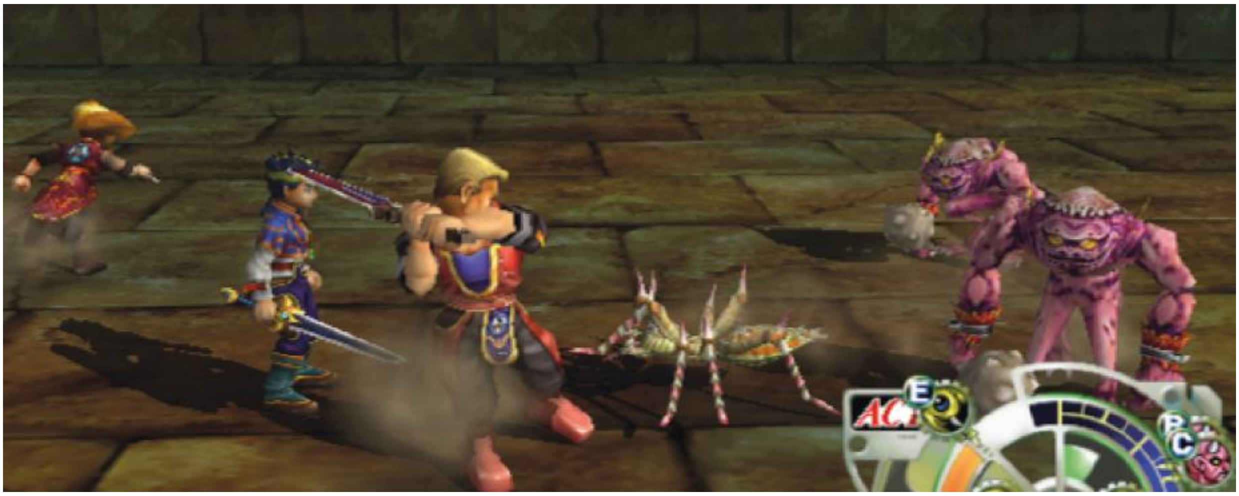
Millenia

See? That wasn't too hard, now was it?
Confident, yet willing to listen to reason.
Just what I want in a M-A-N ♥

The mechanics of the battle system itself haven't fundamentally changed from the original, though the methods for learning magic and special attacks have been streamlined. The dungeon crawling is a little better too, owing to better design, as well as a compass which helpfully guides you to your goal. From a gameplay perspective, *Grandia II* is a small improvement over the first game, and while the story isn't quite as good, it's certainly workable. Too bad the later games weren't able to keep at least that baseline level of quality, though, because they soon become insufferable.

GRANDIA II
Dreamcast

While the battle system of *Grandia II* sees some decent improvements, overall, the game loses some of the heart of the original.



Grandia Xtreme

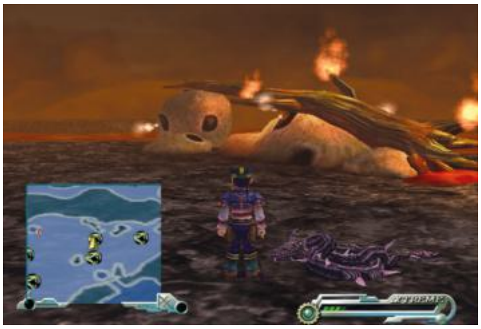
Developer: Game Arts | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): PS2

Pretty much everyone lauded the combat system in the first two *Grandia* games, so Game Arts decided to take a chance and create the goofily-named *Grandia Xtreme*, a spinoff which focuses almost entirely on fighting and dungeon crawling.

In this game world, there are three races that live in tense coexistence: Humans, the elf-like Arcadians, and the beast-like Hazmans. The hero is a Human named Evann, who leads an expedition to investigate a natural disaster called the Elemental Disorder. Much of this is done by exploring seven different sets of ruins. Outside of the introduction, the story is quite threadbare, but when it does pop up, it's nearly insufferable, filled with unlikeable characters and terrible dialogue. The back cover makes a big deal of its famous voice actors, including Dean Cain (from the '90s TV show *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*) as Evann, who shouts nearly every line, while Mark Hamill and Lisa Loeb turn in subpar performances elsewhere.

Other areas have been improved, or at least changed. The exploration camera has changed from the overhead perspective of the previous games to an over-the-shoulder one, and provision of an automap helps too. The maps are much longer and more elaborate than before, and you do simple puzzle solving. Item drops are randomised as well, and there are some procedurally-generated dungeons, if you really want to spend a lot of time hunting for loot. There's also an Xtreme gauge that will help clue in the player to any enemies or treasures hidden nearby.

The battle system has seen some tweaks, including some speed changes that ensure battles move along swiftly. Individual characters do not learn magic, but rather they equip mana eggs, which have their own MP gauges. Functionally, this means you can use magic a lot more often than before, because if one egg is drained you can just switch to another. It's especially useful for healing purposes, because you can only save in the game's sole village, and transport spots in the dungeons are fairly sparse. There's also an expansive crafting system that lets you combine magic powers and create new types of eggs. Other additions include bonus damage from successful longer combos, and combination attacks involving two or more party members.

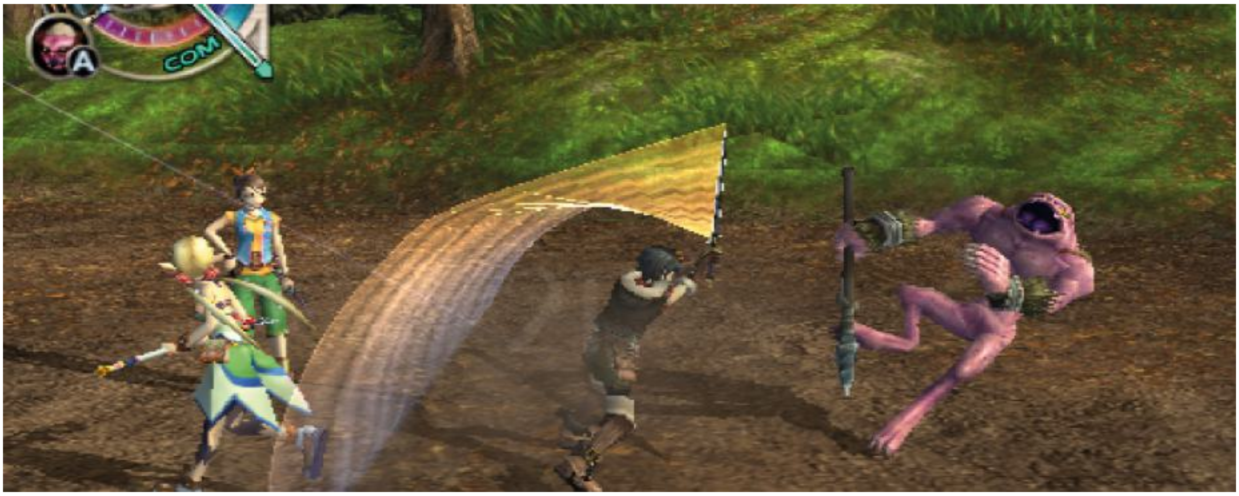


PlayStation.2
GRANDIA XTREME

The graphics are similar to *Grandia II*, except for poorer character designs, despite their now fully detailed faces. Some compromises were made to ensure a smooth frame rate and nearly non-existent load times. The music is as excellent as ever, with a large variety of battle themes, provided, as usual, by Noriyuki Iwadare.

The combat and dungeon crawling are indeed well done, though by nature they are very grindy. But with a barely existent story, *Grandia Xtreme* feels like half of a game. That doesn't mean it's necessarily a bad one, but it feels like it was made for gamers who prefer older RPGs, and it simply never found that audience.

JRPG fans tend to like the genre because of its story, so having cut back on that to focus on battling and dungeon crawling, *Grandia Xtreme* got an unsurprisingly chilly reception.



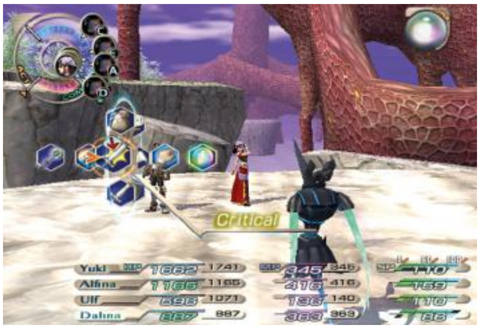
Grandia III

Developer: Game Arts | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): PS2

Grandia III starts off pleasantly enough, telling the story of a young boy named Yuki, whose dreams of becoming a pilot, like his hero, Captain Schmidt, come to pass. One day, while out testing his aeroplane, he comes across a girl named Alfina, who's being chased by a group of mysterious men. Yuki rescues her, and along with his unusually youthful mother, Miranda, offers to help her search for her missing brother, but soon becomes involved in a plot involving a war that nearly destroyed the country centuries ago.

The setup is a little too close to SEGA's *Skies of Arcadia*, but it starts off pleasantly enough. It has the same endearing sense of adventure as the original *Grandia*, especially with Yuki's determination to be the second person to fly across the expansive ocean. The most interesting party member is Miranda, just because it's so rare to see the hero's Mum come along for the journey. Unfortunately, she leaves the party fairly early on, and the story goes completely downhill from there. Dumb characters, plot holes, and a badly-told narrative just completely ruin any of the potential charm.

Luckily, the battle system still holds up. It doesn't include many of the enhancements or character customisation options that were found in *Grandia Xtreme*, but it does introduce an aerial combo system. If you deliver a Critical attack at the right moment, it will send an enemy flying into the air, allowing other party members to leap into the sky and deliver some extra attacks, producing more damage as well as extra items. As in the previous games, this helps nail the action-like feel, despite the fact that it's completely turn-based. The game also occasionally gives advice on the best type of attack to use on an enemy to slow them down. It does feel like the balance isn't adjusted all that well, though, especially during a huge difficulty spike that occurs at the start of the second disc.

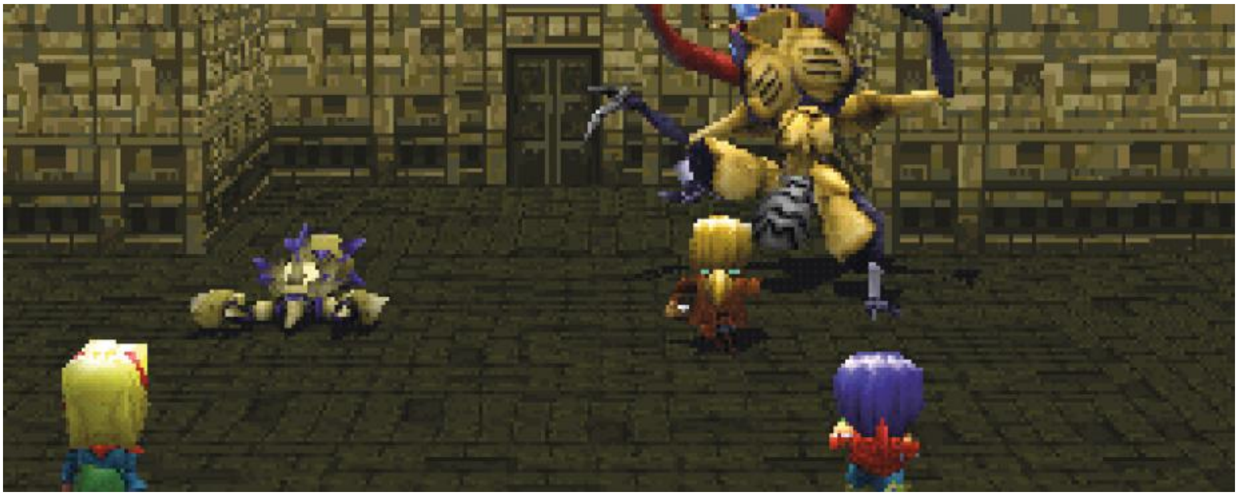


PlayStation.2
GRANDIA
SQUARE ENIX

Graphically, it's worlds apart from *Grandia II* and *Xtreme*, which makes sense, considering it came late in the PS2 generation. The character models are decent, and the environment design is gorgeous, especially in the opening area, where autumn leaves, sun glare, and laid-back music provide an aura of pastoral beauty. Unfortunately, the area design follows the *Final Fantasy X* philosophy, being very linear, if weaving, with only occasional branches. For a game that supposedly focuses on aeroplanes, everything feels weirdly constrained. The battle music is as good as ever, and while the J-pop opening theme is good cheesy fun, it feels out of place with the rest of the game.

Grandia III completed the series' journey into "bad story, great battle system" territory. It's more engaging than *Grandia Xtreme*, but it's also monumentally dumb, which is a shame, considering it starts off so well. Alas, it also spelled the end of the series, more or less – there was an F2P MMORPG called *Grandia Online*, but that only ran from 2009 until 2012.

The first few hours of *Grandia III* are not bad, but after the main character's Mum leaves the party, it's all downhill.



Wild Arms / Wild Arms: Alter Code F

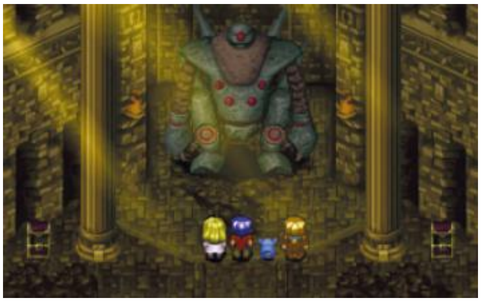
Developer: Media.Vision | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2

In Japan, Sony had three main RPG franchises in the early days of the PlayStation – *Popolocrois*, *Arc the Lad*, and *Wild Arms*. Of these, *Wild Arms* was chosen for English release. It's a fairly straightforward JRPG, developed by Media.Vision, with an unconventional Wild-West aesthetic.

Wild Arms introduces many of the series' set pieces. Among them are the setting of Filgaia, a dying desert planet that gives the series its cattlepunk sheen; the Elw ("El-loo"), an elf-like ancient civilisation; ARMs, a mystical gun technology; and the Baskar tribe, an ecologically-minded Native American-esque society-slash-hippie commune. You play three characters: Rudy, a silent, blue-haired boy; Jack, a treasure hunter; and Cecilia, a princess of the Kingdom of Adlehyde. The three unite to face a band of demons trying to resurrect their leader and destroy the world.

The series is sort of a spiritual successor to Neverland's *Lufia* games, as it's noted for its puzzles, which rely on the use of tools like bombs, grappling hooks, and magic rods. While these puzzles aren't too hard, some solutions do require thinking about. Meanwhile, battles have just enough nuances beyond typical mechanics to keep you engaged. Each character has a unique skill set, with its own approach to progression, like Rudy's ARMs, which are ancient mystical firearms that can be upgraded by gun specialists in exchange for Gella, the series' currency. Cecilia, meanwhile, uses Crest Grids to cast magic spells, which require scarce Crest Graph items to activate them.

Characters can also equip Mediums, magic tablets which invoke Guardians, the elemental spirits of Filgaia, which in turn increase various stats and double as summons. There is also the Force Bar, which increases when you give or receive damage, and can be used to trigger limit break-like abilities.



Part of the early wave of JRPGs for the PlayStation, *Wild Arms* fared well enough to spawn its own franchise.

Graphically, *Wild Arms* is adequate, but unimpressive. The 2D field graphics are colourful and varied, but the 3D battles are rudimentary, with plain chibi character models and blocky monsters. Character designer Yoshihiko Ito does great work with the look of the protagonists, however, establishing the sand-swept, poncho-and-bandana style standard throughout the series. Michiko Naruke's gorgeous soundtrack incorporates whistling, mandolins, trumpets, and acoustic guitar, all crucial to the game's Wild-West vibes. In fact, some songs sample spaghetti western scores: the track played over the opening cinematic sequence, "Into the Wilderness", borrows the main riff of Riz Ortolani's "Day of Anger" from the film of the same name. Overall, the game is a fine start to the franchise, and at the time, it was a decent holdover until *Final Fantasy VII* was released.

In 2003, a PlayStation 2 remake called *Wild Arms: Alter Code F* was released. It adopts gameplay mechanics from the sequels, overhauls the graphics, and extends the narrative, adding more detail and personality. However, the visuals are bland and plastic, and the English translation is worse, so you're better off playing the original.

Wild Arms 2

Developer: Media.Vision | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS1

Wild Arms 2 is one of the most mature and ambitious games in the series, but it suffers from an abysmal translation that renders the narrative confused, and at times, incomprehensible. A ragtag team called ARMS – Agile Remote Mission Squad – faces a terrorist organisation named Odessa, which is attempting a hostile takeover of a new, more industrialised Filgaia, which is once again suffering ecological devastation. The three protagonists are recent ARMS recruits: Ashley, a young soldier; Lilka, a sorceress; and Brad, a war hero turned criminal. Three more characters join the party later: Tim, a Baskar boy; Kanon, a cyborg; and Marivel, a vampire. The party takes on missions at the behest of ARMS' leader, the morally dubious Irving.

In general, the story suffers from a lack of urgency. Odessa's evil deeds feel so ambiguous that it's often unclear what ARMS is fighting against. Still, within the muddled story there are fascinating themes. Heroism is explored in particular. The game subverts the idea that individuals make history, emphasising instead the communal nature of heroism, and that heroic deeds are often done out of necessity or accident rather than bravery.

Wild Arms 2 introduces new gameplay mechanics, both good and bad. The most egregious is world map navigation. Instead of new locations simply appearing on the map, you have to send out a radar signal to reveal them. Another mechanic is more useful: the option to cancel battles before they occur. For most random encounters, a white exclamation point will appear over the player character's head. If you press O in time, the battle will be cancelled. The sequel also sets the precedent of no buyable healing items. You have to find Heal Berries out in the world, and ration them. MP has been eliminated, replaced by Force Power. You start each battle with an amount of FP equal to your level. FP isn't used up by spells, only force abilities. The trade-off is that you cannot use magic outside of battle. With more tools at your disposal, and 360° environments, puzzles are more intricate, but still not overly complex. Battles look nicer than in the last game, if still blocky, and have some new innovations like learning magic from enemies.

Michiko Naruke's soundtrack is wonderful. The theme music, "You'll Never Be Alone, No Matter Where You Go", is a catchy, brass-focused tune, in line with the music borrowed from westerns in the original. The tracks here don't appear to be as transparently lifted from film scores.

Wild Arms 2 tried something new, and didn't quite succeed. It wants to be postmodern and complex, and it is, to an extent, but it never quite grabs what it reaches for. With more polish and a better translation, *Wild Arms 2* might have been as revered as the similarly flawed masterpiece *Xenogears*. The way it is now though, it has its charms and is worth playing, but its downsides can be overwhelming.

PlayStation
WILD ARMS 2

***Wild Arms* hits its sophomore slump with this fairly average follow-up.**

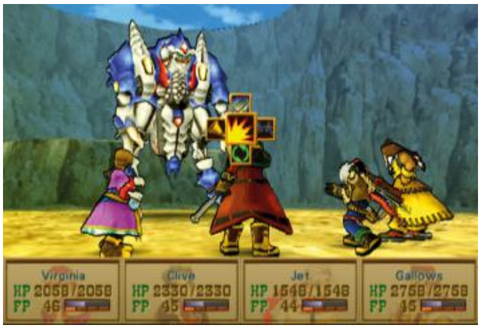
Wild Arms 3

Developer: Media.Vision | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): PS2

Wild Arms 3 is a culmination of all the quintessential series elements introduced in the first two games. It is the most representative, and arguably the best that the series has to offer.

Filgaia is again on the brink of disaster, in even worse condition than in previous games. The entire ocean is gone, replaced by a vast sea of sand. Our heroes are four drifters who meet one night in a freight boxcar during a foiled train robbery. This ragtag group of cowpokes then get drawn into a story of ecological restoration, cultural memory, artificial intelligence, and some deeply disturbing body horror. The characters and their dynamics are tremendously endearing. Virginia is an excellent lead, written with depth and sensitivity. The cold, brash Jet is the most stereotypical, but he works as a great foil for his more kind-hearted companions. Gallows is a fun, if somewhat questionable, subversion of magical Native American tropes, with his slothful nature and hotheadedness. Clive is sweet and softspoken, and he actually manages to be happily married and a loving father without either his wife or child dying.

The battle system has been revamped. Cosmetically, characters now run around the map rather than stand in a line, giving it a more cinematic edge. Most significant to the actual mechanics of battle, however, is the fact that all the characters now wield ARMs as their primary weapons. Upgrading ARMs is the only way to manage physical equipment. Everyone uses magic now, which can be used by equipping Guardian Mediums. Each Guardian has a set of four spells and each character has three spaces for equipping Mediums. In general, magic is a bit more sophisticated, with stat-focused spells being a lot more creative, and important to boss battles. One of the most essential to making the game easier, for example, is the Valiant spell, which increases your attack power based on the difference between your current HP and max HP.



PlayStation 2
WILD ARMS 3

Regrettably, navigation in *Wild Arms 3* is even worse than in the second game. The world is larger and uses a more uniform palette, location clues are vague, and reaching locations can be complicated. The graphics are, for the most part, beautiful and stylish, testament to the fact that good aesthetics go a long way. Cel-shading is the key, with vibrant colours overlaying a brown, decaying landscape. Dungeons and the world map are bland, unfortunately, being drab and oversaturated with yellow-tan colours, but the character models are great. As the game goes on, the places you visit also get weirder, eventually transmogrifying into bizarre, Giger-esque scenes.

Wild Arms 3 is the most refined of the first three games. From here, the series heads off in another direction. Perhaps another sequel in the same vein as this trilogy would have proved to be an even more polished version of the form, but *Wild Arms 3* is still a pretty fantastic peak to reach.

Most of the *Wild Arms* games are Wild West-inspired, but this entry embraces this aesthetic more enthusiastically than the rest of them.

Wild Arms 4

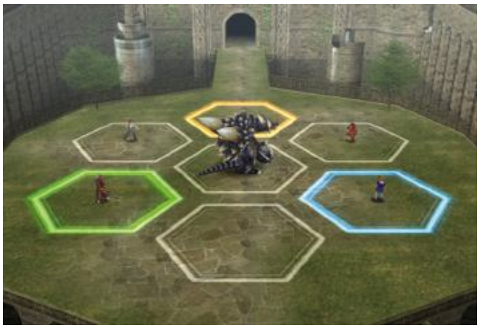
Developer: Media.Vision | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): PS2

Although the signature tropes remain, *Wild Arms 4* of all the games, probably fits the mould least, as it reduces the Wild West influence in favour of techno-fantasy trappings. The story concerns Jude, a boy living in the floating town of Ciel. One day Ciel is attacked by a military force. Jude infiltrates one of their ships and finds Yulie, a captive girl. It turns out that Yulie has the power to control mystical weapons called ARMs, which this force is bent on exploiting. Jude then finds out he can wield an ARM too. They soon join up with two drifters, Arnaud and Raquel, and travel Filgaia searching for ways to protect Yulie. It's a surprisingly dark game, but ridiculous too. The story is, on the one hand, a deeply traumatic exploration of the after-effects of war, but on the other, it has a villain who cuts a train car in half with a chainsaw.

The game suffers from a rushed development cycle, purportedly to match up with an anime series that ended up being cancelled. You can see corners cut everywhere: a scenario that was cut almost in half, a cutback world map, and cutscenes that are mostly just 2D anime portraits with dialogue, more like those in a visual novel.

The story may be too shounen anime for some, as it's clearly aimed at a teenage audience. But the writing's strength lies in the character interactions. The party will frequently pause in the middle of a dungeon or town to chat, bicker, or figure out what to do next. They're a lively team. A nice addition is the Meeting option available at save points in town, which gives you the option of either gathering for a group chat, or having one-to-ones between Jude and each teammate. Plus, this is the first *Wild Arms* game with voice acting, though it's unfortunately quite poor.

Platforming is one of the more entertaining new features. It's never especially difficult, but makes the game world more engaging to interact with. Locations are either fully 360° or have a fixed side-on view. The former are more puzzle-oriented, while the latter are platform-oriented.



Combat is based on the HEX (Hyper Evolve X-fire) system. Your player characters are placed on a grid of seven hexagons, six surrounding one in the centre. To deliver most attacks, you have to be in a hex adjacent to your target. Most magic can be cast from any hex. In addition, any given battle will have three elemental hexagons, which you can use to exploit weaknesses for extra damage.

The music is lovely, as always. Michiko Naruke returns as composer, though others, namely Masato Kouda, Nobuyuki Shimuzu, and Ryuta Suzuki, also contribute songs composed in her style. The Wild West influence, while still present in a number of songs, is more muted this time around, working with the rest of the game to produce a mood more typical for a sci-fi/fantasy JRPG.

Wild Arms 4 is a jarring change for the series, a clear attempt at reinvention. The change in style and the middling-quality story don't help things, but it was arguably a welcome attempt.

PlayStation.2
WILD ARMS 4
SCEA

***Wild Arms* sought a new identity with this title, and doesn't quite find it.**

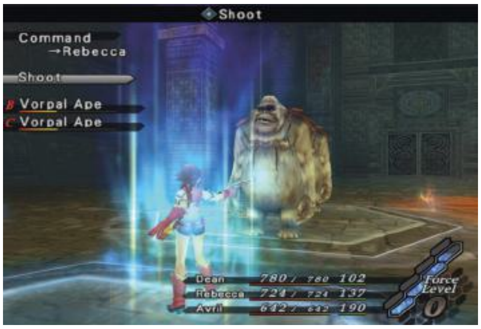
Wild Arms 5

Developer: Media.Vision | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PS2

Wild Arms 5 is a streamlined culmination of all the series has to offer. Released on the tenth anniversary of the first game, it pays homage to the core of what made the series remarkable. It brings back the trademark vaguely futuristic Wild-West style, so it feels more faithful than its immediate predecessor. It also had a smoother production cycle, and consequently more fully realises its ideas, as well as including numerous cameos and references to previous games.

One day, a girl falls from the sky outside a mountain village in Filgaia. Her name is Avril, and she remembers nothing except for two words: Johnny Appleseed. Dean and Rebecca, local teens who discover her, decide to help Avril by travelling the world with her in search of "Johnny Appleseed."

The story was originally written by novelist Kaoru Kurosaki. Having a legitimate novelist at the helm might seem like it would help the story, though ultimately it again feels like a shounen anime, particularly Dean's naive optimism. The focus is less on ecological disasters (at least initially) and more on racism, in relation to the humans and the Veruni, the race that now rules Filgaia. Plus, the narrative takes forever to get going. You'll find yourself running from place to place seeking out hints about Johnny Appleseed, only for any lead to turn out to be a red herring. Then, in the final third, the entire central conflict suddenly reveals itself, and clumsily tries to bring all the threads together. The characters are endearing, at least, with strong designs. Three additional characters join the party as the game goes on, and everyone is given enough attention in the writing to receive a decent character arc. The character models are expressive and crisp, and the voice acting is greatly improved.



The battles are an evolution of the HEX system from the previous game. There are trick bosses on occasion, or ones that simply spike the difficulty enormously, but once you get a feel for the flow of combat, you're set. Tools have been discarded, and replaced by special bullets – freeze bullets, fire bullets, explosive bullets – that act in exactly the same way. Using these, and performing light platforming, are what will take up all your time in dungeons.

This is the first and only main game in which the soundtrack was not composed by Michiko Naruke. Her influence is still apparent, though, and the result still contains some excellent tunes. Masato Kouda, who is known for his work in the *Devil May Cry* and *Monster Hunter* series, contributed songs alongside Noriyasu Agematsu, a new composer primarily known for anime and mobile game soundtracks.

Wild Arms 5 was the last "pure" *Wild Arms* game developed by Media.Vision, and while not without its quirks and flaws, it kept the spirit alive. Another entry might have topped it, but what we have here is a great show of improvement, and an altogether fond farewell to a classic series.

PlayStation.2
WILD ARMS 5
T
seed

***Wild Arms 5* is a noticeable improvement over its predecessor, though outside of some mobile spinoffs, it would prove to be the last game in the series.**

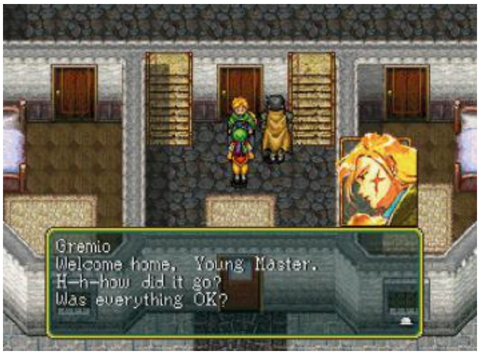
Suikoden

Developer: Konami | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): PS1, SAT, PSP

The Water Margin is one of the four great classical novels of Chinese literature, and has seen numerous adaptations over the centuries. Konami's *Gensou Suikoden* ("Fantasy Suikoden", shortened to *Suikoden* for the international releases) takes loose inspiration from it. Created by Yoshitaka Murayama and Junko Kawano, each of the five core games in the series focuses on a hero and his 108 companions, as they become entangled in the politics of war and experience its human cost. The world is a blend of Western and Eastern fantasy, with some unusual elements, like intelligent anthropomorphic animals and the occasional vampire. Many of the games revolve around the power of the 27 True Runes, which govern the world. The first two games are 2D (with 3D elements, like battle backgrounds), so they look better than most other early PlayStation RPGs.

The hero of the first game is Tir McDohl (though you can name him whatever you want), son of the general of the Scarlet Moon Empire. He discovers the Soul Eater, one of the 27 True Runes, and is quickly hunted by his own people for its power. After escaping, he joins a rebellion and must fight against the corruption in his old home, friends, and family.

To raise an army, you can recruit 108 characters to join your cause. Many of them are combatants, but some are not, and instead perform various tasks around your headquarters. Watching your army grow from a ragtag rebellion to a full-fledged army is indeed one of the greatest strengths of the series. And given that there are so many characters, many of them are distinct and quite likeable. The hero is a silent protagonist, but is surrounded by lively characters, like Gremio, his devoted manservant, and Flik and Viktor, two buddies who join your group early on. Many characters join up automatically as you progress through the game, though you have to hunt for some of the others. However, it is possible to permanently miss some if you don't know where to look for them. Getting the best ending requires that you recruit everyone; play with a guide handy, so you don't miss anything.



Gremio
Welcome home, Young Master.
H-h-how did it go?
Was everything OK?

***Suikoden* and *Wild Arms* were the first two decent RPGs to show up on the PlayStation, in the days before *Final Fantasy VII*.**

Up to six fighters participate in combat at once. Fights are speedy, with all characters attacking and trading blows simultaneously. However, equipment is simplified, since there are so many characters to juggle. You can attach runes to them to cast spells, and the system works like that in the original *Final Fantasy*, with a certain number of spells available at each magic level. There are also a handful of brief, turn-based strategy segments, in which you command units in your army, as well as one-on-one duels that play out something like rock-paper-scissors.

Suikoden is pretty good, but its main contribution is to set up the world and characters for its superior sequel. Playing this entry isn't essential to understanding any of the later games, but it is pretty short (less then 20 hours), so you can breeze through it.

Suikoden II

Developer: Konami | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1, PSP

Team Name
Seed
ATT 15 DEF 12

PlayStation
Suikoden II

Suikoden II takes place a number of years after the rebellion against the Scarlet Moon Empire, and focuses on a different part of the world, centring on a conflict between the City States of Jowston and the Kingdom of Highland. The hero (again silent and nameable, typically referred to as Rio) and his buddy Jowy, new recruits in the Highland Army, end up betrayed by their leaders. After joining with a group of mercenaries, the two are split up, and begin to rise through the ranks, but in opposing armies. It's a stirring set-up for a brother-against-brother narrative, and their relationship is one of the most important parts of the game, even if they spend most of it apart.

It's the characters that really make *Suikoden II* special, even beyond the central heroes. Nanami, the hero's sister, plays a role similar to Gremio's in the first game, being a counterpart to bounce off the silent hero. Many characters from the first game return, including Flik and Viktor, who play similar roles in the mercenary group to those they had before. It's really here that *Suikoden* fleshes out its world, in its examination of how that world, and the characters that remain, have changed since the events of the first game. (You can import a saved game from the first game too, so Tir will join your party.) It tells a separate story, though, and can still be enjoyed on its own. Many other characters come from different parts of the game world, making it feel much larger than what's actually available to explore. This type of worldbuilding makes *Suikoden* feel more like a fantasy novel series than a typical JRPG.

Through much of the adventure, the antagonist is Luca Blight, an insane, ravenous madman who stalks the heroes, and destroys anything in his path. He would make an excellent final boss, and indeed, the battle against him requires that you toss your whole army into combat, replacing fallen warriors with fresh new ones. Yet this fight only occurs partway through the game, and the war continues even after he is slain. War is never about a single villain, but rather much more deep-rooted issues, and it's that level of maturity that sets the *Suikoden* series apart from other JRPGs. But around the edges, there's also a bit of levity, especially the bit where you can recruit a flying squirrel.

The storytelling is the strongest aspect, though it all holds up pretty well. Not much has significantly changed since the original, though the character artwork is nicer, the soundtrack is much more expansive, and the game itself is quite a bit longer. It also has one of the best JRPG endings ever, providing you manage to recruit all 108 characters. This is tough without a strategy guide, especially since you can permanently miss many of them.

Suikoden II was released in North America in the shadow of *Final Fantasy VIII*, leading to initially poor sales, but word of mouth eventually led fans to discover one of the best RPGs of its era.

***Suikoden II* was the feisty underdog competing against big-name RPGs released in North America in 1999, but over time it has held up as one of the greats.**

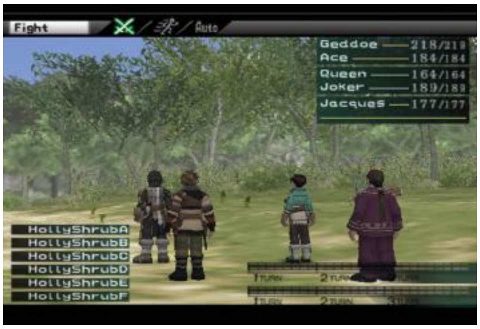
Suikoden III

Developer: Konami | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): PS2

The first in the series to be released on the PlayStation 2, *Suikoden III* makes two major changes. Firstly, it's now entirely in 3D. The environments are a little simple, as are the character models, but they're more than adequate in capturing the feel of the artwork. Secondly, and more importantly, it features three different heroes, each with a distinct personality, ditching the silent protagonists of the first two games. In what the game calls the Trinity Sight System, with chapters focusing on a character in one of the land's three major factions.

At the centre of the story are the Grasslands tribes and the Zexen Confederacy, which after years of tension, have signed a ceasefire. But that quickly falls to pieces as the Holy Kingdom of Harmonia waits for war to break out so it can invade the Grasslands itself. The Grasslands are represented by Hugo, the son of one of the tribe's leaders while Chris is a female knight with the Zexens, and Geddoe is the leader of a mercenary group fighting for Harmonia. While the three heroes are initially in conflict with each other, they eventually join together to hunt for the Flame Champion, a legendary warrior who wields the True Fire Rune.

SEGA's *Shining Force III* technically uses a similar multi-scenario narrative mechanic, but the storytelling and characters are much more engaging here. Hugo himself is a typical hero, but his buddy Sgt. Joe, a surly talking duck, is the true star of his scenario. Chris is also compelling, considering she takes on what would normally be a masculine role. The three scenarios also allow the supporting cast to shine, particularly Geddoe's team. There is an optional fourth character: Thomas, the keeper of the mansion where your army's sets up its base. While he's never at the centre of the excitement, his stories are just as important in fleshing out the day-to-day operations of the conflict. Unlike the first two games, there is only one ending, but if you recruit all 108 characters, then an extra scenario unlocks, starring the antagonists. (There's also a joke scenario starring a dog, which is just adorable.) Konami had also released a spinoff series called *Suikogaiden*, visual novels that bridge the second and third games, and feature assorted fan-favourite characters.



PlayStation.2
Suikoden III

The multiple viewpoints of *Suikoden III* add a more nuanced vantage of war than most RPGs.

Where *Suikoden III* stumbles is with the battle system. Here, you put characters into pairs that act as a single unit, so you're only giving orders three times per turn instead of six, It might save time, but it also feels like you never have full control over them. Additionally, most dungeons are just boring straight hallways, and you often need to traipse through the same areas as different characters, putting up with the redundant random battles. There is no longer an overworld either, just a map on which are select destinations. Overall, the plot and writing is almost as good as in its predecessor, though some of these gameplay issues drag it down slightly.

Suikoden IV

Developer: Konami | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): PS2

Yoshitaka Murayama, one of the creators of the *Suikoden* series, left Konami near the end of the development of *Suikoden III*, leaving the other co-creator, Junko Kawano, to pick up the slack. As a result *Suikoden IV* reels back many of the changes from the third game – it again focuses on a single, silent protagonist, and the classic battle system returns, albeit with only four party members instead of six, and a reduced number of enemies as well. Kawano was also the character artist for the first game, and her style returns, though it's improved considerably over the intervening decade. However, the story is a prequel, taking place a full 150 years before the first *Suikoden*. At the outset, the hero (canon name: Lazlo) and his friend Snowe are knights defending the Island Nations from the nation of Kooluk. By happenstance, Lazlo ends up inheriting the deadly Rune of Punishment, after which he is exiled from the force. He then takes up a command within the nation of Obel to continue fighting back against Kooluk.

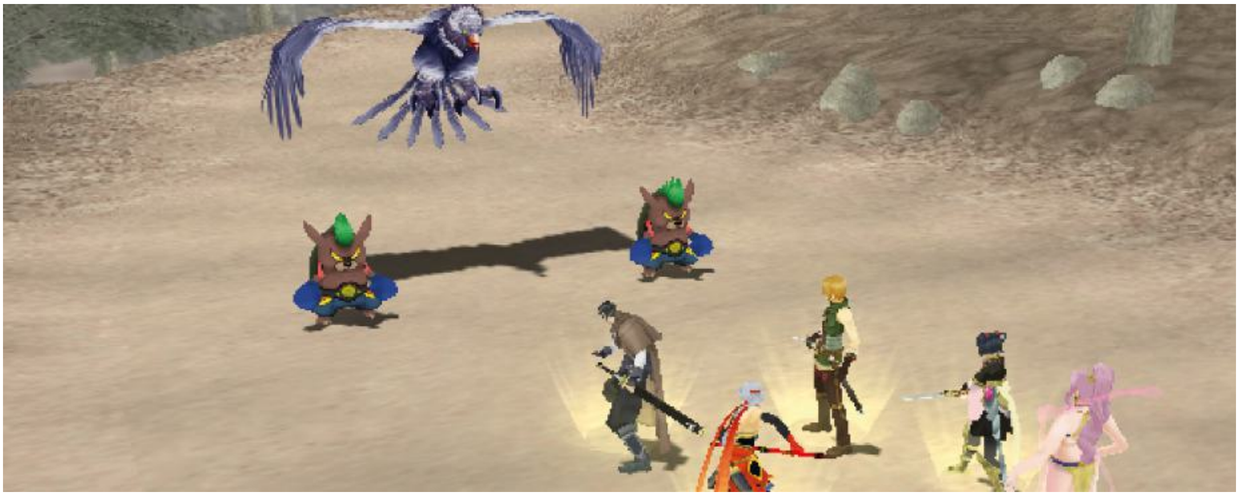
The story is alright – the nautical setting is novel, and it is pretty darn cool basically being a pirate, plus there are some new anthropomorphic buddies, including a cat, kobolds, and mer-people – but it does have some weak points. Since it takes place so far (chronologically) away from the other games in the series, there are barely any recurring characters, outside of the few seemingly ageless ones, such as Jeanne the sage and Viki the ditzy time-traveller. The story sets up Snowe to be sort of like Jowy in *Suikoden II*, in that he's a former friend who ends up being caught on the opposing side of the battle, but seeing as he's a spoiled, jealous brat, it's hard to feel much sympathy for him. The pacing is dreadful and the first half drags. The game is also fairly short, and just feels underdeveloped.

Nearly the entire game takes place on the ocean, and it has a pleasantly bright, nautical vibe. The tactical segments also play out as ship battles, which is a nice change of pace. But outside of that, this is a pretty ugly game – the style is completely different from that of *Suikoden III*, with much worse-looking character models, awkward animation, and sparse environments. There are some voice-acted scenes, but they're not very good. The overworld consists almost entirely of water, and not only is it gigantic and barren, but your boat moves insanely slowly (even when you use the fast-forward function), and the random battles are just constant. Coupled with the simplified combat system, it's just dreadful to play. There is some interesting stuff in here – the side characters are still decent – but it just feels undercooked; even the most forgiving *Suikoden* fans admit that this is easily the weakest entry in the mainline series.

Not long after the release of this game, Konami published *Suikoden Tactics*. While starring a different cast, it takes place in the same era and around the same locale as *Suikoden IV*, and so it shares many of its secondary characters.

PlayStation 2
Suikoden IV
KONAMI

***Suikoden IV* is the black sheep of the main series, suffering from the departure of one of its key creators.**



Suikoden V

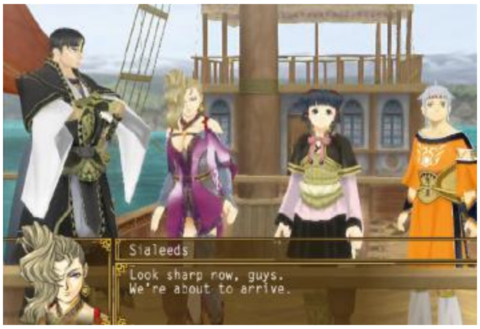
Developer: Konami | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PS2

In the fifth *Suikoden* title, you control the prince of the kingdom of Falena (canon name: Freyjadour). The queen is slowly going mad, thanks to her use of the Sun Rune, causing her to violently lash out against her people. This weakness allows her to be overthrown by a rival noble faction, getting the princess kidnapped in the process. The prince and his entourage escape, and begin to rebuild an army to take back their home, which includes righting the wrongs done by the queen. Meanwhile, the country is consumed by civil war.

Konami was cognizant of some of the blowback from the changes in the third and fourth entries, so this one looks and feels as close to the original two PlayStation titles as possible. It heralds the return of the six-person battle system, as well as the behind-the-back perspective, and uses an overhead isometric viewpoint for exploration. It also captures the look and feel of the older interface almost perfectly.

The story, too, is excellent, full of war, tragedy, betrayal and political intrigue – in other words, all of the things *Suikoden* does best. It's also a prequel, but takes place only a few years before the first game, so it feels less divorced from the story and world than *Suikoden IV* did. The characters are excellent, particularly Georg Prime, one of the prince's knights, himself a minor character from *Suikoden II*. There have been some small gameplay tweaks, allowing for various formations in battle, as well as the ability to bring backup party members in case you want to substitute them between fights. The tactical battle sequences have changed to real time, rather than turn-based, though.

The story is probably the best since the second game, but *Suikoden V* is somewhat let down by some other issues. Primarily, the pacing, particularly in the opening segment of the game, is dreadfully slow. There's way too much aimlessly running around large environments, and it takes several hours before the story really begins. Even after this point, it feels slower and more drawn out than the previous games. Part of this is also due to technical issues, as there are noticeable load times between the many room changes and going into the annoyingly high number of random battles.



Sialeeds

Look sharp now, guys.
We're about to arrive.

The character models are a substantial improvement over those in the previous PlayStation 2 games, and the story scenes have much better animation and voice acting. Unfortunately, the rest of the game just looks really ugly, due to repetitive texturing and a muted colour palette. You can't move the camera at all, other than zooming in, which makes navigation especially troublesome, especially as the designers liked to hide stuff just out of view.

Suikoden V obviously suffered from budget constraints, but at least it has most of the key ingredients that make the series truly great, so those who have the patience for its annoyances will still find it one of the strongest in the series. However, the series diverged greatly from its roots after the PlayStation 2 era, in ways that tended to alienate long-time fans.

PlayStation 2
Suikoden V
KONAMI

Various technical and design issues somewhat cripple what would otherwise be one of the best entries in the *Suikoden* series.

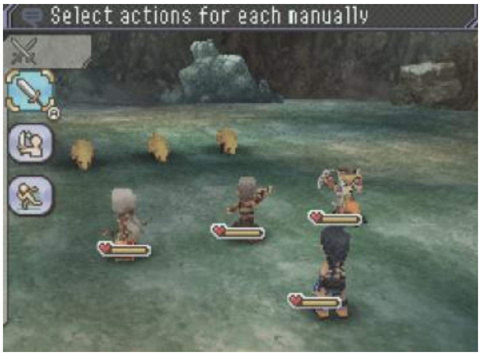
Suikoden Tierkreis

Developer: Konami | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS

As with a lot of their long-running franchises, Konami was really struggling with how to continue the *Suikoden* games, especially as their original leader had long since left, and they'd basically been treading water since. With the DS entry *Suikoden Tierkreis*, on a console primarily aimed at kids and casual gamers who presumably wanted to experience something without having to play catch-up through five older games, they just rebooted the whole thing.

The story begins with a young man named Sieg, who discovers a book that opens his eyes to the existence of multiple realities. As he journeys beyond his village, he and his friends come up against a fanatical group called The Order, which believes strongly in predestination and fate. The story was written by Kazuyoshi Tsugawa, who also wrote *Suikoden V*, and while it's pretty good in spots, it's also far from the heights of the previous games.

Some aspects of the previous games have been carried over, like the 108 Stars of Destiny and the forts, as well as the anthropomorphic characters, though the army and duel battles are gone. Having a non-silent protagonist also feels a little weird. The game uses 2D backgrounds, which are nice, but with slightly super-deformed character models, which are not. The battles, reduced to four characters, plus enemies, as in *Suikoden IV*, at least look and play like those in the classic games. The soundtrack is still excellent, though the voices are poor in both acting and sound quality. So on its own terms, it's a pretty good game, but it only halfway feels like *Suikoden*.


Select actions for each manually

Suikoden
TIERKREIS
NINTENDO DS
KONAMI

***Suikoden Tierkreis* introduces the possibility of multiple parallel worlds, which usually makes for an interesting premise, but also doesn't feel a whole lot like a *Suikoden* game.**

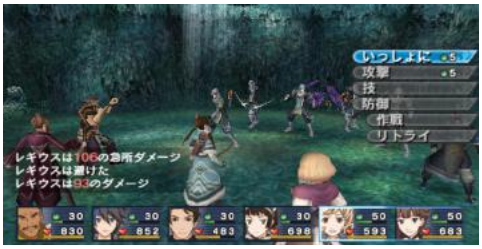
Genso Suikoden: Tsumugareshi Hyakunen no Toki

Developer: Konami | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): PSP

Konami was clearly fumbling around with *Suikoden Tierkreis*, but they at least got a pretty alright, if not exactly outstanding, game out of it. The same can't be said of the PSP follow-up, subtitled (in translation) "The Woven Web of a Century". It takes place in one of the many parallel dimensions referenced in *Tierkreis*. Three friends are thrown back in time 100 years, and must face off against monsters called Teras Falma that terrorise the world once a century. You jump between three different time periods, recruiting various characters (including the hero's ancestors) to fight back. Often, when there's a problem in the present, you just go back to one of the two periods in the past to fix it.

The visuals are fully 3D now, and pretty decent, better than in most of the PS2 *Suikoden* titles. However, this game feels even less like a *Suikoden* game than *Tierkreis* did. Random encounters are gone, and six characters are again used in combat, but it uses a 3 × 3 grid, and allows units to combine together to attack. There are still 108 Stars to find, but a much smaller proportion of them are playable; some are even technically dead, and only appear as names. Previous games focused on stories of war, while this one does not, and you can't even walk around your base. It feels like Konami slapped the *Suikoden* name on a different RPG, cobbled together the bare minimum of elements to make it part of the series, and kicked it out the door. Even on its own terms, it's not very good – dungeons are difficult to navigate due to viewpoint problems, and the time-travel concept is neat in theory, but executed poorly. In Japan it received a chilly reception, and Konami didn't bother to localise it.

This spelled the end of *Suikoden*, though its series creator announced a spiritual successor in 2020 called *Eiyuden Chronicle*, still awaited.


レギウスは106の急所ダメージ
レギウスは避けた
レギウスは93のダメージ

PSP
KONAMI
幻想水滸伝

This final entry in the series tackles time travel, and feels even less like a *Suikoden* game than its DS predecessor did.

Koudelka

Developer: Sacnoth | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1

Around 1997, *Mana* series composer Hiroki Kikuta led a small exodus away from Square to found a new studio, Sacnoth, through a partnership with SNK. The company was primarily founded to develop Kikuta's passion project: *Koudelka*.

Not unlike a survival horror game, *Koudelka* is set over the course of a single night and localised entirely within a haunted house – an abbey, in this case. There are secrets to uncover, puzzles to solve, and all manner of creatures to kill. Kikuta, an avid reader of gothic horror and weird fiction, took inspiration from the works of H.P. Lovecraft, William Hope Hodgson, and Lord Dunsany.

Koudelka Iasant is a Romani Gypsy medium, drawn to Nemeton Abbey, in Aberystwyth in Wales, by mysterious visions. When she arrives, she finds the abbey overrun by monsters and the undead. She soon enters an uneasy alliance with two other interlopers – roguish adventurer Edward Plunkett, who came seeking treasure; and Catholic bishop James O'Flaherty, who's a little less forthcoming about his motivations. What's fascinating about this party of three is the constant reiteration that their fellowship is solely one of convenience. They're not always likeable, either: Koudelka is acerbic and single-minded; Edward is charismatic but amoral, and isn't above murder; while James is a fundamentalist bigot who despises those who he deems "degenerates" – namely, immigrants and the underclass. Each of their personalities shines through due to an expert localisation; while the voice acting can be a little spotty, the scripted dialogue is easily on par with *Vagrant Story*'s.

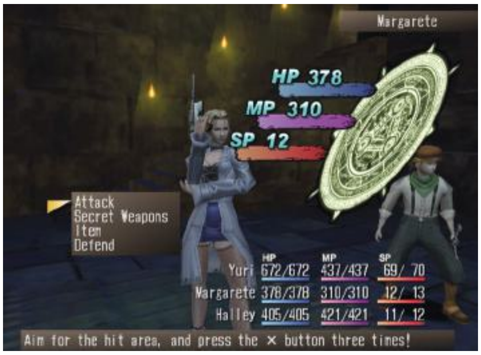
As Koudelka's party scours Nemeton, enemies are encountered randomly and fought within a turn-based strategy grid. A little chess-like, Koudelka and her comrades start on one side of the grid, while her foes are positioned on the other. A combatant cannot cross a foe's first line of defence, allowing those in the back rows to be protected from mêlée attacks by a single frontline combatant. Each character is able to equip every weapon and cast all spells in the game, with each action increasing experience for its respective weapon class or spell. Each only has three levels, but it's best to have each character take on only a few specialities. Unfortunately, combat is incredibly slow, to the point that it holds *Koudelka* back from being a true great. Each time a turn is taken, the entire board has to reload, which causes battles to take far longer than they should.

According to Kikuta, his true desire was for *Koudelka* to be a genre-breaker with an innovative real-time combat engine, but he has alluded to internal disagreements with staff that led to compromise. Though he intended *Koudelka* to be the first in a tetralogy, he was so dissatisfied with how it turned out that he stepped down as Sacnoth's CEO immediately after the game's release. Art director Matsuzo Machida picked up the torch with the cult hit *Shadow Hearts*, a spiritual sequel set in the same universe. Koudelka herself even shows up along the way.

Spread across three CDs, *Koudelka*'s computer-rendered full motion video cutscenes and backgrounds are almost as high-quality as Square's.

Shadow Hearts

Developer: Sacnoth | Released: 2001 | Platform(s): PS2



	HP	MP	SP
Yuri	672/672	437/437	69/ 70
Margarete	378/378	310/310	12/ 13
Halley	405/405	421/421	11/ 12

Aim for the hit area, and press the × button three times!

PlayStation.2
SHADOW HEARTS
MIDWAY

Despite coming out against heavy hitter *Final Fantasy X*, *Shadow Hearts* carved out a name for itself with its dark storyline, involving battle system, and unusual sense of humour.

Shadow Hearts takes place in Europe in an alternate version of 1913, the year before the start of World War I. It focuses on a girl named Alice, a young exorcist whose father was recently murdered, and who is the target of a kidnapping by a flying British warlock in a top hat. This attack is thwarted by a man named Yuri, who joins up with Alice, starting an adventure that spans parts of Europe and Asia, as they discover the dark forces at work in the world. Yuri isn't some regular old guy, but rather a Harmonixer, which basically means he's part demon.

Shadow Hearts uses a more traditional RPG structure than *Koudelka*, including a typical battle system. Rather than just picking commands, though, every action is dictated by the Judgement Ring, presented as a circle with a spinner, where you need to time your button presses to increase the action's strength. You can enhance the Ring to an extent, as hitting the zones at its edges will provide bonuses, and increasing those zones makes them easier to hit. In addition to HP, you also have to manage SP, or Sanity Points. These drain automatically as encounters go on, but when they run out, the character becomes uncontrollable and must be cured. Yuri can also transform into various demonic forms in combat, but this also has its downsides. Defeated enemies will accumulate Malice, which can only be dispersed by regularly battling foes in a Graveyard contained within Yuri's psyche.

Director Matsuzo Machida, previously the art director of *Kouldeka*, pointed to both H.P. Lovecraft and Go Nagai (*Devilman*) as inspirations for the story, which along with its historical setting, create an atmosphere of horror unlike that of any other RPG at the time. But it's not all grim, because there are odd bits of humour, particularly the many acupuncturists who upgrade character abilities, all of whom are attracted to Yuri. (He is quite handsome, after all.) Yuri is an excellent protagonist too, dark and brooding, since he has the power of demons within him, but also humorously aloof. The rest of the characters are also fairly interesting; they include Margarete, an international spy, and Keith Valentine, an ancient vampire. Koudelka herself also pops up, as does Roger Bacon, a centuries-old immortal philosopher and a recurring character across the series. The soundtrack by Yoshitaka Hirota (along with a few tracks from Yasunori Mitsuda) is also fairly dark, unusual for an RPG, but quite appropriate here.

Shadow Hearts had the misfortune of being released within weeks of *Final Fantasy X*, which greatly overshadowed it from a technical perspective. The CG-rendered backgrounds and simple cutscenes paled in comparison, even though the art design and style is worlds apart from those of Square's more mainstream title. Nonetheless, its distinctive atmosphere – a blend of Western and Eastern history, architecture, and mythology – built a following that allowed it to live for a few sequels.

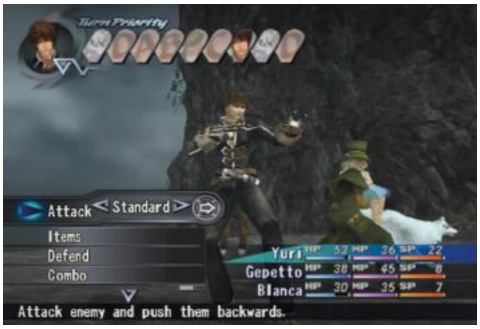
Shadow Hearts: Covenant

Developer: Nautilus | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): PS2

This *Shadow Hearts* sequel takes place after the start of World War I. It initially focuses on a young German soldier named Karin, who is charged with investigating what appears to be a demon in the French village of Domremy. That demon turns out to be Yuri, who has certainly seen better days. At the end of the first game, there were two endings, with different fates for Alice. This sequel decided that the bad ending was canon, so Yuri is mourning the loss of his love. But there's no time to sit around crying, as Yuri has also made himself an enemy of the Vatican. Karin teams up and runs off with him, taking you on another expansive adventure, picking up even weirder characters.

Indeed, the first *Shadow Hearts* has bits of humour, but this sequel really amps up the weirdness. There's Gepetto, a puppeteer who uses his dancing marionettes to attack; Blanca, a ferocious white wolf; Joachim, a showboating vampire who attacks with a variety of large, blunt items (including tables, mailboxes, and gigantic fish), whose alter ego is the superhero wrestler Grand Papillon; and Anastasia Romanov, based on the real-life Russian princess, who has a crush on Kurando Inugami, a samurai from a Japanese village. Each character has unique sub-quests that allow them to become more powerful; Blanca can dogfight with other wolves, Karin looks for scores from Wagner's Nibelung opera cycle, and Gepetto hunts for gay porno-themed "stud" cards to create new dresses for his doll.

In addition to the many sub-quests, *Shadow Hearts: Covenant* gives you much greater customisation of the size and type of Judgement Rings, allowing you to balance the sizes of risks and rewards. As such, the fights are like slot machines that you can control. You can also turn them off completely, if you prefer the traditional way of fighting. But once you get used to it, you realise that major battles become all the more compelling when they rely on your reflexes – and your willingness to take risks – as much as your strategy. The battle system has seen other improvements, including allowing four characters in combat (versus three from the first game), and the creation of combos by knocking foes into the air and having other party members pummel them, creating larger chains of damage.



Attack enemy and push them backwards.

Visually, the game is a huge improvement over its predecessor, using fully 3D-rendered locations and much improved character models. The cutscenes are much more prevalent and better directed, and have some decent voice acting and genuinely excellent (and funny) scripts.

Shadow Hearts: Covenant is an excellent game, with a large cast that's diverse in both personality and function, and an even more unique take on history (famous faces include Lawrence of Arabia and Rasputin the monk); moreover, its gameplay systems are greatly enhanced over its predecessor's. In other words, it's one of the best JRPGs on the PlayStation 2.

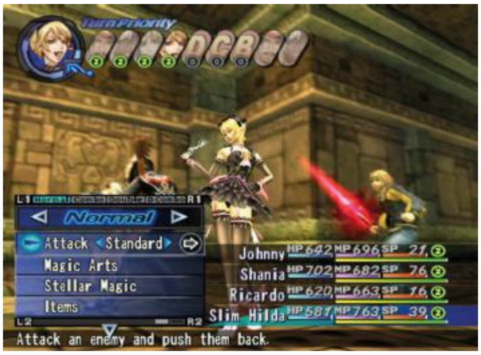
PlayStation 2
SHADOW HEARTS
COVENANT

Heroine Karin Koening is featured on the American cover of this *Shadow Hearts* sequel, but the true star is once again the sarcastic half-demon, half-hero Yuri.

Admiral
GEPI

Shadow Hearts: From the New World

Developer: Nautilus | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): PS2


Turn Priority
L1 Normal Combo Double Combo R1
Normal
Attack Standard
Magic Arts
Stellar Magic
Items
L2 R2
Johnny HP 642 MP 696 SP 21 ③
Shania HP 702 MP 682 SP 76 ③
Ricardo HP 620 MP 663 SP 76 ②
Slim Hilda HP 587 MP 763 SP 39 ③

Attack an enemy and push them back.

PlayStation.2
Shadow Hearts
From the New World
T
XSEED

Shadows Hearts: Covenant completed Yuri's story, so the third game features a whole new cast of characters and a new setting. While previous games took place in Europe, *Shadow Hearts: From the New World* takes place in the Americas, about 15 years after its predecessors.

The hero this time is Johnny Garland, a 16-year-old orphan who has recently set up a detective agency in New York City. As the story begins, he's on a job, when he gets attacked by a strange monster that appears from an otherworldly portal. Before he can be unceremoniously devoured, he is rescued by Shania, a Native American warrior who has been hunting down these demons with her stately partner, Natan. The three join forces to solve the mystery of these monstrosities, all of which seem to be related to the mysterious appearance of a blue-haired girl named Lady. In the course of their adventure, they'll rescue Al Capone from Alcatraz, visit a jazz bar in Chicago, get kidnapped by the Pirates of the Caribbean, rescue some "aliens" from Roswell, and explore various South American and Pacific Island ruins. Once again, there's a colourful cast of characters – Frank Goldfinger, the elderly ninja who learned the ways of the ninjitsu after crash-landing in Brazil; Mao, a gigantic cat who's a mob boss by day and movie star by night; Hilda, a Gothic Lolita vampire with a weight complex (who's also the younger sister of Keith and Joachim from the previous games); and Ricardo, a mariachi band member who attacks with his guitar.

The game's look and mode of play are both similar to those of its predecessor, with some notable improvements. The combo system from *Covenant* has returned, allowing party members to juggle foes for massive damage, and you can now also perform Double attacks with a single character. On top of all of this there are customisable magic spells for each character (using little maps called Stellar Charts), and a whole slew of unique special moves for each character. Since the game looks and plays much like *Covenant*, you can expect some recurring archetypes – Hilda can turn into a bat, much like Joachim, and Shania can shapeshift into various demons with her Fusion ability, much like Yuri, although this time the transformations are accompanied by a magical striptease.

If all of this sounds like a big departure from the previous *Shadow Hearts* games – well, it kind of is. The previous games had a goofy sense of humour that teetered between serious and absurd at a moment's notice, but *From the New World* crosses the "ridiculous" line with even more regularity. Many of the horror aspects have also been toned down, and while Johnny isn't a terrible character, he's not nearly as interesting as Yuri. Still, if you look at it as a spiritual successor to (the Japan-only) *Tengai Makyou: The Apocalypse IV* (see page 241), then it's an absolute riot, even if it isn't the best *Shadow Hearts* game.

By changing the setting from Europe to the Americas, and playing up the series' goofier elements, this final entry in the *Shadow Hearts* series feels like it goes overboard ... but it's still really funny.

Atelier (series)

Developer: Gust | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2, DS, PS3, PS4, PSV, WIN, NSW

The modern *Atelier* games are known for their gorgeous artwork, supplied by various book illustrators. *Atelier Escha & Logy* (top of page) is by Hidari, while *Atelier Firis* (above left) and *Sophie* (box artwork, above) are by NOCO and Yugen.

The *Atelier* series is developer Gust's longest-running and most robust series, though you may not realise it if you only look at their English localisations. Releasing 21 mainline titles in 23 years, with additional side games and ports sprinkled throughout, Gust has made *Atelier* practically an annual series. It doesn't matter what's going on in the gaming industry – you can always rely on Gust developing and releasing a new *Atelier* game.

What makes *Atelier* stand out from other JRPGs is its focus on crafting. While the games often take place in different worlds and timelines, they all have one thing in common – your character is an alchemist, and creating items is your bread and butter. Often enough, the main character isn't particularly strong, or seen as a hero, but a person that just makes items.

While a few of the games do try for a more standard good vs. evil fantasy approach, most notably the titles of the PS2 era, most of the *Atelier* games star a rather average young girl just trying to get through life with the help of alchemy. Rarely is there a big bad guy to beat, and the measure of success is determined instead by the work you complete and the friendships you cultivate along the way.

As a result, *Atelier* games have multiple endings, depending on a few factors. One of the most important factors in a player's ending is how much progress you've made through other characters' side stories. The allies you make along the way often have their own stories to explore, and their Friendship ratings need to be raised in order to see these stories through to the end.

Generally, you'll arrive at the ending relating to whoever has the highest Friendship rating when you complete the game, unless you have reached the requirements for some of the more general endings (including true endings and some joke endings). Cultivating friendships really ties into the series' slice-of-life feeling, as the most satisfying endings tend not to rely on beating an epic boss and saving the world, but instead on being friends with everyone and doing your job well.

Atelier games rely on making strong crafting systems to keep players engaged. The mechanics change from sub-series to sub-series, but the core stays the same: make good items of the best quality possible. Players that understand these systems can practically break the game by making extremely powerful items, a practice that Gust has embraced over the years with the addition of powerful super-bosses that need such min-maxing to defeat.

With the focus on crafting and creating items, the *Atelier* games' RPG elements, like battling and exploration, take a back seat. Until recently, the *Atelier* titles had a fairly standard turn-based battle system, with a few tweaks to liven things up a little. The main point of exploring is to gather ingredients to make even more items, so simplistic battles and exploration provide a way to break up crafting, but ultimately don't detract.

9 / 1
3000
Buy
Sell
Talk

What should I do?

PlayStation.2

Atelier Marie **and** ***Elie*** **were both ported to the PlayStation 2, pictured here with an English fan translation.**

Another main feature of the *Atelier* games is time management. Until *Atelier Sophie,* players had to complete Assignments (generally creating items) before the deadline, or risk a bad ending, or even game over. Assignments become more difficult as the game progresses, so while early jobs are remarkably easy, Assignments at the end of the game are challenges that require rare and high-quality ingredients. Generally, someone who grasps each *Atelier* game's mechanics will be able to complete the game with ease, but the constant pressure of deadlines and the intricacies of making the best items can trip up new players as they learn what works and what doesn't.

The main *Atelier* titles can be split into seven sub-series, based on the country or world they take place in. Most of these are trilogies, with a few exceptions. The *Arland* saga has four titles, while the *Gramnad* and *Mana* sagas only have two titles. On top of this, the *Atelier* series has multiple spinoff titles, some based on the main series, others featuring brand-new worlds and characters.

The first trilogy of *Atelier* titles is labelled the *Salburg* trilogy, and consists of *Atelier Marie: The Alchemist of Salburg, Atelier Ellie: The Alchemist of Salburg 2,* and *Atelier Lilie: The Alchemist of Salburg 3.* A lot of the series precedents are set here, including the long-standing time management elements, the emphasis on growing friendships, and the overall *Atelier* trilogy formula. The first two *Salburg* titles were released on the PlayStation, while *Atelier Lilie* was the first of many *Atelier* titles to come out on the PlayStation 2.

It wasn't released in English, but the *Salburg* saga is particularly popular in Japan, and the three main titles have gotten comic and novel adaptations, plenty of ports, and more. *Salburg* was also the basis for three spinoff titles – *Hermina and Culus: Atelier Lilie Another Story, Marie & Elie: Two People's Atelier,* and *Atelier Marie, Elie, & Anis: Message on a Gentle Breeze.* There was also the mobile spinoff *Atelier Marie & Elie: The Alchemist of Salburg,* which let players become a student at the same alchemy academy in *Salburg.*

After the Salburg trilogy wrapped up, Gust continued with the *Gramnad* saga, which only consists of two titles. *Atelier Judie: The Alchemist of Gramnad* stars Judie, who was flung 200 years into the future when an alchemy experiment went wrong. *Atelier Judie* is also the first *Atelier* title to move away from the time management mechanic. *Atelier Viorate: The Alchemist of Gramnad 2* (sometimes romanised as *Atelier Violet*) tasks players with making a popular store with the assistance of alchemy, which makes it a bit different from the *Salburg* titles, but it still retains most of the *Atelier* formula.

The *Iris* trilogy of *Atelier* games were the first set of *Atelier* games to be released in English. This is also one of the trilogies that departs from a lot of the *Atelier* norms by taking a more average, fantasy-RPG approach. More emphasis is placed on big, evil threats trying to ruin the world than on a girl just trying to graduate or build a successful atelier.

Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana is also the first *Atelier* game that stars a male protagonist, and one of only two games to do so. *Atelier Iris 2: The Azoth of Destiny* is a prequel to *Eternal Mana,* and the first game in the series to star two protagonists: Felt and Viese. *Atelier Iris 3: Grand Phantasm* is loosely based on the other titles, but doesn't have a clear place in the trilogy's timeline.

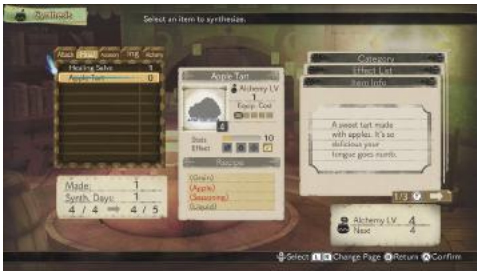
The *Mana Khemia* series may drop the *Atelier* name, but these two titles are mainline *Atelier* games regardless. *Mana Khemia: Alchemists of Al-Revis* and *Mana Khemia 2: Fall of Alchemy*

An adventurer, huh...?
I wanna be one too, but I'm not athletic or smart enough...

See? No one's gonna care if the workshop is gone, along with that lady.

For the PlayStation 3, Gust upgraded the visual style using illustrations by Mel Kishida, who provided exceptional artwork for the heroines.

PS3
Atelier Totori



The *Atelier* games are filled with attractive character artwork, though indeed, a good amount of time is spent in menus, combining and creating items.

take more cues from the *Iris* trilogy than previous games: these titles bring back mechanics from previous entries, such as time management (in the form of school semesters). *Mana Khemia* is the only other mainline *Atelier* title to feature a male protagonist, and *Mana Khemia 2* is a direct sequel to the first.

When the *Atelier* series made the jump to the PlayStation 3, Gust decided to take the series back to its roots. The *Arland* titles return to the slice-of-life stories, emphasis on characters rather than the world, and Assignments with time limits. Of the three original *Arland* games, *Atelier Rorona: The Alchemist of Arland* is the most like the *Salburg* and *Gramnad* titles. *Atelier Totori: The Adventurer of Arland* expands on the exploration options a bit, although it's still very much about alchemy. *Atelier Meruru: The Apprentice of Arland* has players building up the small country of Arls with alchemy.

In 2018, Gust decided to make a fourth game in the *Arland* saga with *Atelier Lulua: The Scion of Arland*. Taking place several years after the events of the original *Arland* trilogy, this title stars Rorona's adoptive daughter as she follows in her mother's footsteps and learns more about the secrets of Arland. *Atelier Lulua* also takes advantage of some of the mechanics developed for later sagas, and ditches the time limits in favour of a system that unlocks new recipes and progresses the story based on completing objectives in a magical alchemy book.

Finally, the *Arland* titles inspired the mobile title *Atelier Questboard*, which took its locations and characters mainly from *Atelier Rorona*.

After the *Arland* trilogy, Gust continued the series on the PlayStation 3 with the *Dusk* saga. The *Atelier* series takes a darker turn here, as this saga takes place in a world that's dying, and those who study alchemy hope to learn how to revitalise the land. The *Dusk* trilogy is also a bit of a turning point for the series, as Gust began updating some of the mechanics.

Atelier Ayesha: The Alchemist of Dusk is the most like the earlier *Atelier* games, with time management and exploration at the forefront, as Ayesha tries to find her missing sister. *Atelier Escha & Logy: Alchemists of the Dusk Sky* returns to the dual protagonist setup, not seen since *Mana Khemia 2*. While *Escha & Logy* also has a time management aspect, the title is known for having some of the most lenient deadlines in the series. *Atelier Shallie: Alchemists of the Dusk Sea* gets rid of time management altogether, in favour of a Life Task system for progression, which is the framework for most of the subsequent *Atelier* games.

For *Atelier*'s jump to the PlayStation 4, Gust continued to tinker with the formula, in the *Mysterious* saga. *Atelier Sophie: The Alchemist of the Mysterious Book* keeps most of the *Atelier Shallie* formula, other than going back to one protagonist, but adds day/night and weather systems, which affect the enemies and items you see. *Atelier Firis: The Alchemist and the Mysterious Journey* actually reintroduces time management, and also features an open world to explore, a first for the *Atelier* series.

It unfortunately didn't stick, however, as *Atelier Lydie & Suelle: The Alchemists and the Mysterious Painting* returned to the same formula as *Atelier Shallie* and *Atelier Sophie*. This third title of the trilogy returns to the basics of *Atelier*, with the titular twins working to raise the reputation of their atelier.

The latest game in the *Atelier* series, *Atelier Ryza: Ever Darkness & the Secret Hideout* is the

The *Atelier Iris* trilogy for the PlayStation 2 was the first to be localised into English, and introduced more standard RPG elements into the mix.

Attack
LIFE
MANA
Lita 71/ 71 26/ 26
Klein 64/ 64 52/ 52

Siren
Eden is a world for Mana and alchemists.

PlayStation 2
ATELIER IRIS

???

...Sophie, don't you think that was rather haphazard? If you injured someone, you...

Fast Forward Off
Attack

PS4
Atelier Ryza

***Atelier Firis* and *Shallie* are two of the more recent entries. *Atelier Ryza* (second row) is the latest game in the series, and one of the most popular.**

start of a new saga, with a sequel, subtitled *Lost Legends & the Secret Fairy*, released in 2021. *Atelier Ryza* is the first *Atelier* game with a real-time battle system, and more attention paid to its battle system overall. It also takes an even more laid-back approach to game progression, allowing players to progress at their own pace.

While the main series is substantial on its own, there are also a number of spinoffs and sub-series to delve into. The three Nintendo DS titles, *Atelier Lise: The Alchemist of Orde*, *Atelier Annie: Alchemists of Sera Island*, and *Atelier Lina: The Alchemist of Strahl* are all part of the *Orde* saga, but strangely enough only the second game (*Atelier Annie*) was released in English. These three titles all follow the typical *Atelier* formula, but are a bit watered down for the handheld.

There is also *Atelier Elkrone: Dear for Otomate*, a PlayStation Portable release that takes the general *Atelier* formula and implants it into an otome title (a dating sim for women). *Atelier*'s latest mobile effort is *Atelier Online: Alchemist of Bressisle*, which features all the series' locations and cast members. In it, players can work together or solo to complete tasks; it's very much an *Atelier* title, but with multiplayer aspects. The game is still ongoing at the time of writing.

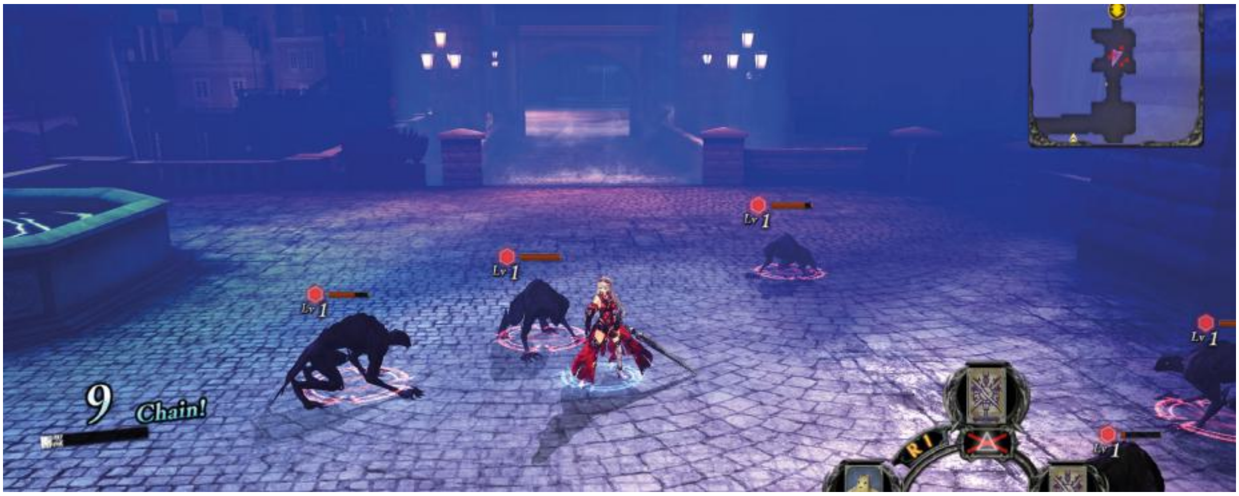
For the series' 20th anniversary, Gust created *Nelke & the Legendary Alchemists: Ateliers of the New World*. *Nelke* is actually not an *Atelier* title, and instead of creating items, you're managing a town. The protagonists from the previous *Atelier* titles all make appearances in *Nelke*, and this is generally a title meant as fan service for long-time series fans.

Although not explicitly part of the series, there is also a related game for the Nintendo DS called *Nora to Toki no Koubou* ("Nora and the Time Factory"). This was meant to be crossover between Gust and Atlus, a sort of melding of their *Atelier* and *Etrian Odyssey* series. In practice, it's pretty much just another *Atelier* game, simply using even cutesier artwork by *Etrian Odyssey* character designer Yuji Himukai.

Its heroine is Nora, a girl on an apprenticeship in a foreign land. She takes up residence in a foggy forest, where she's mistaken for a local witch, so she must run errands for the townspeople to prove she's not evil. It plays similarly to the older *Atelier* games, though Nora can age items (making them "younger" or "older") with her time factory. In addition to the beautiful 2D visuals, it has an outstanding soundtrack by Michiko Naruke (*Wild Arms*).

Atlus' *Nora to Toki no Koubou* isn't technically part of the *Atelier* family, though it may as well be. Alas, despite the burgeoning popularity of the series in North America at the time, it never left Japan.

NINTENDO DS
ATLUS



Nights of Azure (series)

Developer: Gust | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PS4, PSV, NSW, WIN

PS4
Nights of Azure 2
Gust
KT

While Gust is primarily known for its long-running *Atelier* series, the developer branched out a bit with its gothic action RPG *Nights of Azure* series, which can be best described as being like the PS2 *Castlevania* games but with more women. In each game, the player takes control of a demon-slaying woman in an organisation called the Curia, herself half-demon due to some blood transfusions, in a setting based on 19th century Europe. The first stars Arnice, who meets up with her old partner/flame Lilysse while investigating demon activity on a small island. Lilysse, however, is chosen to be a First Saint, a role in which she will sacrifice herself to stave off the evil Nightlord. The second, subtitled *Bride of the New Moon*, has a similar set-up, with a woman named Aluche sent to protect her childhood friend Liliana, who has the power to control time.

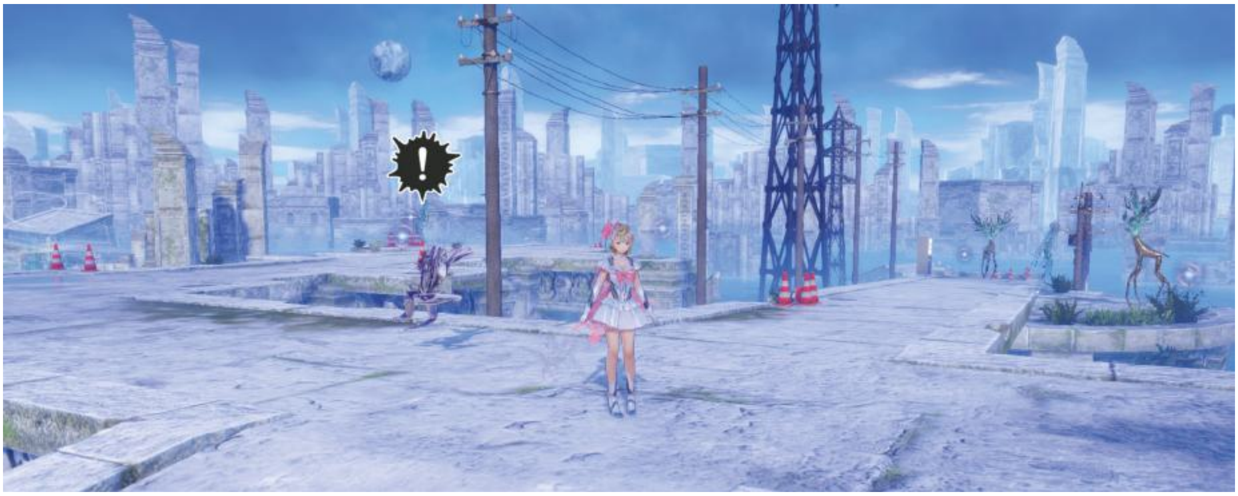
The games play similarly, as you run around a map, beat up demons, gain experience and find treasures, and eventually work your way towards a goal. The combat takes more after Koei's *Dynasty Warriors* than a straight action game like *Devil May Cry*, as it's really more about satisfying hack-and-slashery rather than reflex-based technique.

The first *Nights of Azure* game heavily utilises summon creatures called Servans, which have their own equipment and are levelled up separately from Arnice. In the second game, the focus is more on helper characters called Lilies, who are human partners fighting alongside Aluche. (Servans are still around, but their roles have been reduced, so they either have a single attack or change into a different weapon for Aluche.) Calling them "Lilies" is a little on the nose, since that's the English translation of the Japanese word "yuri", a term used for media featuring gay female romance, just in case the focus isn't clear. All of the Lilies have bonds with Aluche, which are strengthened over the course of the game.

While the games are outwardly similar, they differed in some key members of the development staff – in particular, the first was written by Miwa Shoda, known for Square games like *SaGa Frontier*, while the second was written by Makoto Shibata, known for Tecmo games starring woman like *Deception IV* and *Fatal Frame*. Each has its own positives and negatives – while the second game has a much larger roster of characters, with seven Lilies in total (including Arnice from the first game), it doesn't quite have the same focus on the central couple as the first one. Combat is also faster and punchier in the first game, primarily because the console versions suffer substantial frame rate issues. The second game also features a time limit, as in some of the *Atelier* games, forcing you to focus on specific events or else the game will end.

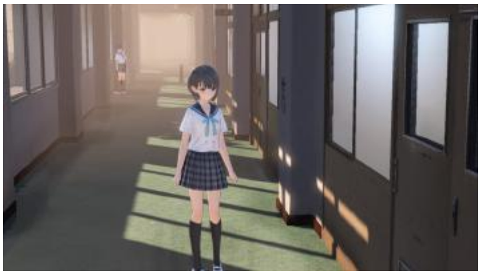
The main emphasis is on the sex appeal of the characters, who tend to be clad in revealing outfits. The music is outstanding though, a mesh of the type of orchestral rock found in *Castlevania* or *Ys* games – carving bad guys to a rad soundtrack is enough to keep the games going, even if they are inherently repetitive and shallow.

***Nights of Azure* is the result of someone at Gust looking at *Castlevania* and going "not enough sexy women!"**



Blue Reflection

Developer: Gust | Released: 2017 | Platform(s): PS4, PSV, WIN



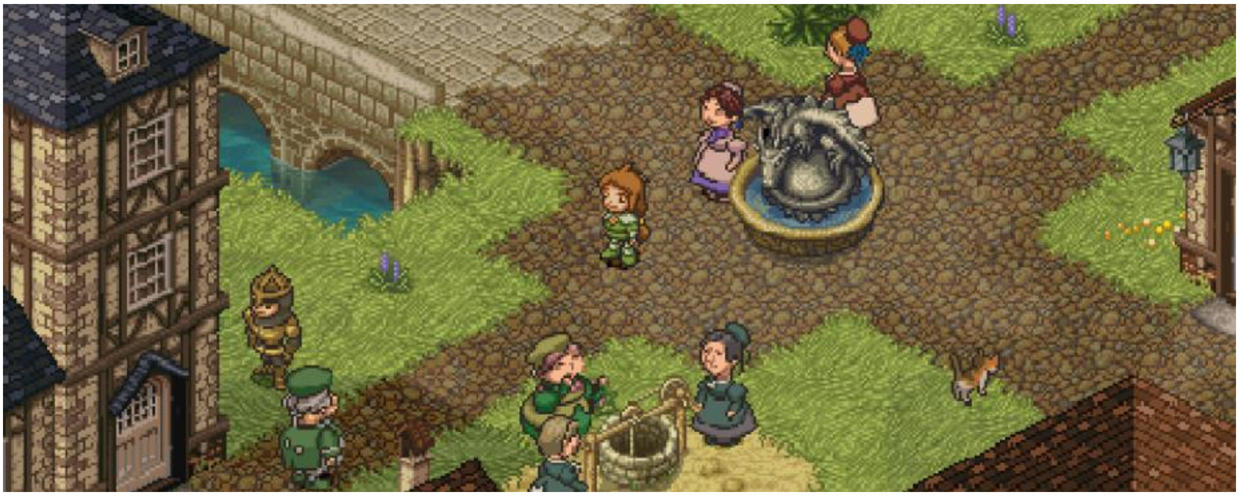
Gust's *Blue Reflection* takes the basic concept of *Persona,* adds in magical girls, and mixes it with the style found in the company's *Atelier* series. Taking place at Hoshinomiya Girls' High School, the player controls Hinako Shirai, a young woman who had to give up her dream of ballet after an injury. In class, she meets two sisters, Yuzuki and Lime Shijou, who share an ability to become "Reflectors", essentially magical girls wearing musical idol-like costumes. They have the ability to enter an alternate world, the Common, where other people's thoughts and emotions are visible, and fight enemies there. During the day, you can walk around the school grounds and talk to other classmates, attempting to befriend them, or go on sub-quests in the Common to quell the negative feelings there. You can find Fragments, which can be used to enhance attacks; you can also improve your relationships so you can summon friends for supplementary attacks during combat.

When exploring the Common, the battle system is similar to the *Atelier* games on the PlayStation 4, with a turn queue that acts in real time, and attacks that can knock back enemies, allowing allies to act more quickly. Most attacks consume MP, so you can choose to Ether Charge, which not only recharges magic but also strengthens the Reflect meter, which is shared among the party. Once it's been built up enough, any character can consume this meter to act multiple times in a single turn. It's a fun and flashy system, though the difficulty is pretty low once you get the hang of it.

The repetition proves to be an even bigger problem. There are only a handful of different maps in the Common, and the enemy variety is pretty limited, so once the game settles into its groove, you're doing the same things and visiting the same places repeatedly. Most of the interactions between the girls are low-stakes slice-of-life stories, and the dating elements, such as they are, are fairly threadbare. It's also unclear whether the game is aimed at teenage girls, or players who like to ogle teenage girls, as the camera feels awfully voyeuristic, with lots of low-angle shots and lingering scenes of the girls in the shower or with soaking-wet shirts. The Japanese version featured a dress-up mode where you could look up the girls skirts, though the camera was restricted in the international release.

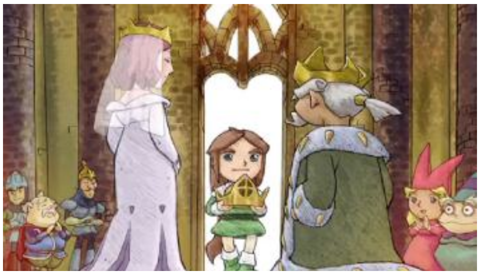
Outside of the creepiness, *Blue Reflection* does have an incredibly chilled vibe, which makes it feel sort of like a lazy, dreamy summer afternoon. The interface is bright and sleek, the characters' outfits are appealing, and the surreal, colourful atmosphere of the Common make it a gorgeous game to just relax with. Plus, unlike *Persona,* there's no pressure from a set schedule, so you can move the story along at your own pace. The music is largely piano-driven but is accompanied by violin and a bit of dubstep in the battles; all of it is fantastic. Like other Gust titles, the game is obviously constrained by budget, limited in content and suffering from assorted technical problems, but the appealing art style helps mitigate those problems.

As a magical-girl RPG, *Blue Reflection* has a totally chilled vibe that makes up for its deficiencies elsewhere.



Popolocrois (series)

Developer: G-Artists/Sugar & Rockets/Sony | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2, PSP, 3DS



PoPoLoCrois

While well regarded in Japan, the only English release of the main *Popolocrois* games was on the PlayStation Portable, where it was presented in slightly less than ideal form.

During the early days of the PlayStation, before *Final Fantasy VII* shook everything up, Sony of Japan had three main RPGs – *Wild Arms*, *Arc the Lad*, and *Popolocrois*. The first two were aimed at stalwart fans who had trained themselves on Famicom and Super Famicom games, while *Popolocrois* was marketed towards a broader audience, with its straightforward gameplay and charming visuals. It's also based on a three-volume manga series that began in 1978, written and illustrated by Yousuke Tamori.

The game takes place in the titular Kingdom of Popolocrois, starring the ten year old prince Pietro. He grew up believing that his mother had died in childbirth, but upon coming of age, learns that her body actually rests in a coma. Further, the king's crown has been stolen by the GamiGami Devil, and it just so happens that crown contains his Mum's soul. Determined to save her, the young lad sets off of an adventure across the Kingdom. Along the way, he's joined by a friendly forest fairy named Narcia and the powerful White Knight.

Combat takes place directly on the field, without moving to a separate screen. It works similarly to *Final Fantasy*'s ATB system, with characters being able to attack once a charge bar is filled. The field is broken down into large squares, with each character being able to move a limited distance per turn. Most special moves attack multiple squares, so you can look to take advantage by attacking multiple enemies at once. It's quick and breezy, and you can even assign AI to automatically battle for you.

Popolocrois is a ridiculously charming game. It's entirely in 2D, with some rather pleasant spritework and cutesy, likeable character designs for friend and foe alike. The main characters are all brave children, and there's a particularly storybook atmosphere that sets it apart from everything else on the market. It's easy to see why Sony passed on it for an international release back in 1996, though – the American branch was primarily targetting the teenage and young adult male audience, who they surmised would have little interest in a cutesy little RPG based on a property that was never released in English. In its native Japan, though, it was a resounding success, selling more than 500,000 units and leading to an anime TV series.

This was followed up by a spinoff called *Poporogue*. At the outset of this game, Popolocrois Kingdom is whisked into the sky and transported into a dream universe, so Pietro must explore the shifting landscapes to find a way to get back home.

The game is presented as a Rogue-like ... kind of. Each dungeon is randomised, to an extent, as you run from room to room, hunting for items and killing enemies. However, it doesn't quite work like the *Mystery Dungeon* games – instead, when you engage an enemy, it switches to a tile-field, turn-based battle system similar to that in the first game, though a little simplified. At first, you only control Pietro, but there are several mercenaries you can hire to fight with you, plus a fourth slot that can be filled by a townsperson who can provide various services, ranging from selling you

LV 1
HP 22
MP 17
TP 7
ドローン

***Poporogue* is an oddity, taking a casual game and sticking in a hardcore sub-genre, but it somehow works.**

items to allowing you to save anywhere. (Characters like White Knight and Narcia are still around, but they won't join you for your dungeon crawling.) However, the permadeath element of *Rogue* are not present at all, as progression is more typically RPG-like – in other words, you're not caught in a constant loop of dying and replaying. As with the rest of the series, it is aimed at a broader RPG audience, and it's quite a bit less punishing than the "Rogue-like" description would suggest. It is, however, still rather repetitive, so you really need to be into this kind of dungeon crawler to enjoy it.

The proper *Popolocrois* sequel, *Popolocrois Monogatari II*, was released in 2000, with a prologue that takes place before *Poporogue* and the rest of the game taking place after. Here, the villain is a goddess who has gone mad, and is searching for four tablets that will allow her to destroy and remake the world, so Pietro and team, now all slightly older, must stop her.

With the release of the PSP, Sony combined both *Popolocrois Monogatari* games (ignoring *Poporogue*) as an early release for the platform. They aren't direct ports though, but rather a condensed version that removes a considerable amount of content (particularly from the first game), as well as all of the voice acting that was featured in the sequel. However, it was released outside of Japan, and is the only way to play the core games in English, so it's worth the compromise.

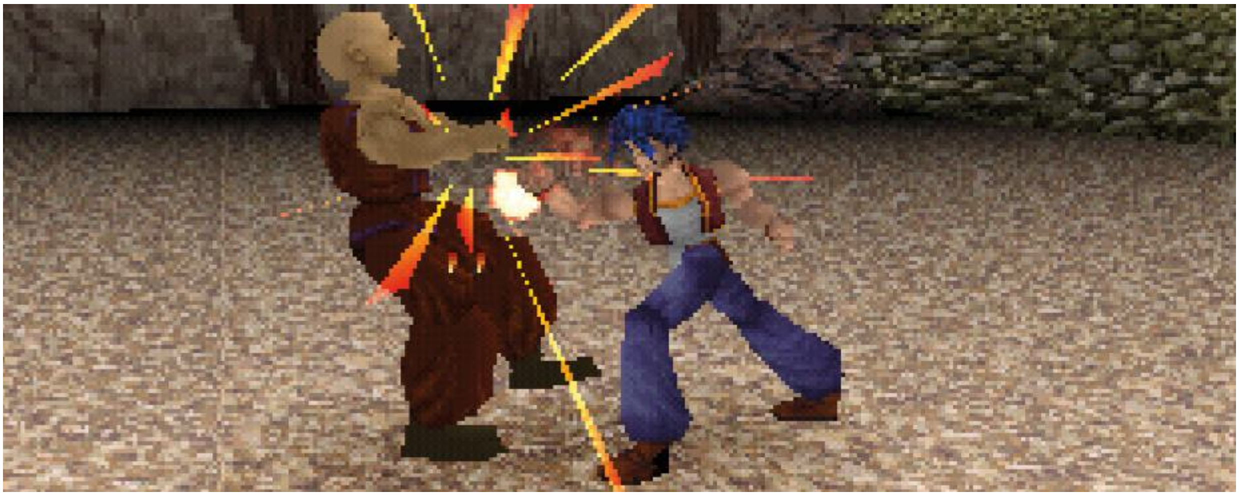
The series continued on the PlayStation 2, first with *Popolocrois: Hajimari no Bouken* ("The Adventure Begins"). Taking place 15 years into the future, Pietro and Narcia have wed and are now king and queen of the kingdom. The new hero is eight-year-old Prince Pinon, who must venture out from the castle walls to save his land from danger. He is joined by Luna, a mysterious girl he meets at sea, and Marco, the son of Leona from the original games.

The series shifts into 3D, and unfortunately this has generated a number of problems. The character models do a reasonably decent job of replicating the unique designs, and while the environments are very typical of early PlayStation 2 games, they're not too bad-looking. The more substantial issue has to do with the enormously long load times and absolutely atrocious camera, which is always zoomed in far too close and makes it difficult to navigate the levels. Additionally, you're expected to hunt through each area for little elements that increase your magic, but this is infuriating when coupled with the camera issues and high random encounter rate. It's also an incredibly short game, with just a few dungeons, barely lasting more than a dozen hours. The sequel, *Tsuki no Okite no Bouken* ("The Adventure of the Law of the Moon"), continues the story, and while it's much longer, most of the core issues remain. The stories are still charming, but since there were anime series based on these games, it's probably better to watch those instead of playing these.

While that spelled the end of the main series, *Popolocrois* has seen a revival as a tie-in with the farming/life sim *Bokujou Monogatari*. This is part of the same series initially known in English as *Harvest Moon*, which at this point, due to licensing issues, is known internationally as *Story of Seasons*. It's nothing like the old games, but it still has their charm. There was also a Japanese smartphone title released in 2018, subtitled *Narcia's Tears and the Fairy's Flute*, which continues the adventures of Pietro and Narcia as slightly older children.

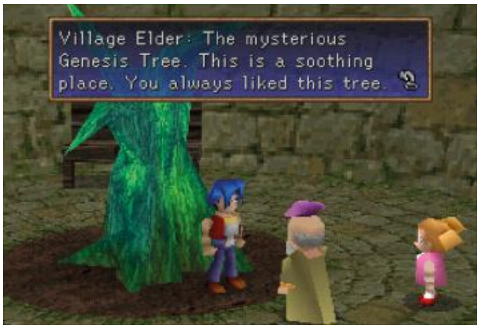
Like many 2D RPGs, *Popolocrois* didn't handle the transition to 3D very well, which eventually killed the series.

PlayStation.2
ポポロクロイス
はじまりの冒険



Legaia (series)

Developer: Prokion | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2



Village Elder: The mysterious Genesis Tree. This is a soothing place. You always liked this tree.

PlayStation
Legend of LEGAIA

In the history of the world of Legaia, humans and beasts called Seru used to live together in harmony, until that peace was broken by a mysterious mist, which caused the Seru to go crazy and possess the humans. The village of Rim Elm has protected itself with a gigantic wall, though even that eventually collapses due to the deadly power of the mist. A young man named Vahn discovers beasts called Ra-Seru that are immune to the mist, and that the mist can be repelled by activating the Genesis Trees that are spread throughout the land. He sets off from home to save the world, joining up with a feral girl named Noa and a warrior monk named Gala. The game is the brainchild of Hidenori Shibao, who previously worked on the *Paladin's Quest* games.

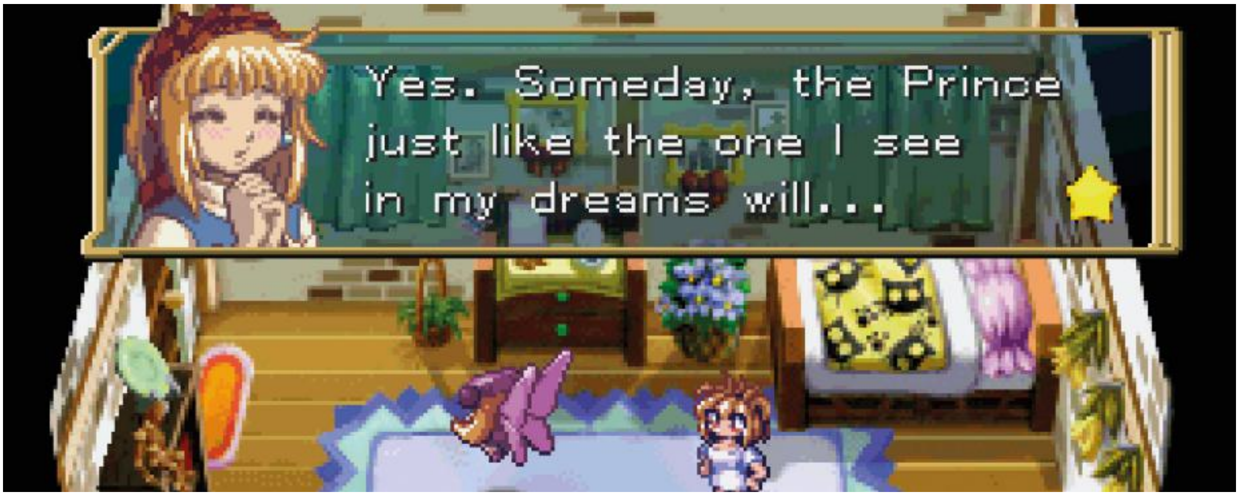
Legend of Legaia uses a mêlée-based battle system called the Tactical Arts System. When attacking, you can create combos with the four directional buttons on the control pad. Certain combinations will activate a variety of special moves called Arts, which can be linked together. These moves depend on the availability of Art Points. In short, it's a more advanced version of the combat found in Square's *Xenogears*. Each defeated enemy can also randomly teach you a magic ability, which can be levelled up during use. It's a pretty satisfying setup, though some battles can feel drawn out, as you go through the same animations over and over.

All of the visuals are 3D, with chibi models for field exploration and more realistic ones for combat. The type of equipment is reflected in the combat models, a rarity for its time. The music by Michiru Ohshima is very distinctive, heavy on the flutes and drums, giving it a very new-age feel. Overall, while there are certainly better RPGs on the PlayStation, the atmosphere and story come together to create a decent experience.

The game was followed up by a PlayStation 2 sequel called *Legaia: Duel Saga*. The storyline is completely unrelated (and Hidenori Shibao was not involved), but it uses the same combat system. It focuses on a group of people called Mystics, who control spirits called Origins but are shunned by modern society. The hero, a Mystic called Lang, is manipulated into giving away the crystal that controls his town's water supply, and begins an adventure to get it back.

While overall not a drastic step down from its predecessor, this sequel just doesn't have a similarly interesting world or story, and ends up feeling very run of the mill. The battle system has been improved slightly by adding in combo attacks, plus there are spell-mixing abilities and five playable characters (though only three can participate in combat). While Michiru Ohshima returns for parts of the soundtrack, the rest of the music was supplied by legendary composers Yasunori Mitsuda (*Chrono Trigger*) and Hitoshi Sakimoto (*Final Fantasy Tactics*), who put in some fantastic work that helps redeem this otherwise mediocre game somewhat.

While not quite a classic, its punchy fighting system gives *Legend of Legaia* a feeling like few others.



Yes. Someday, the Prince just like the one I see in my dreams will...

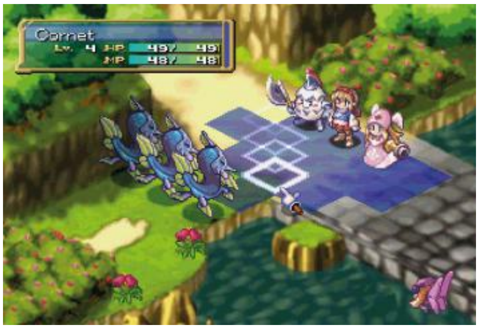
Marl Kingdom (series)

Developer: Nippon Ichi | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2, DS, PSP

Nippon Ichi made a name for itself with the later *Disgaea* series of strategy RPGs, but their first foray into role-playing was with the *Marl Kingdom* games. They are, basically, Disney princess stories given an anime makeover, and presented as a video game. The first is the only one released in English, released for the PlayStation and localised as *Rhapsody: A Musical Adventure*. It stars a young girl named Cornet, who has the power to talk to dolls, with her best friend being the sassy puppet Kururu. Together, they sing their hearts out as Cornet yearns for handsome Prince Ferdinand. But she has a few rivals – namely, the rich (and spoiled) Etoile, daughter of the wealthy Rosenqueen family, whose fancy exterior hides the fact that they function like the mafia, and Marjoly, an evil witch who believes herself to be the fairest of them all, and also controls a cat army.

The entire game is presented in 2D. Battles are viewed isometrically, with characters moving on a grid, and Cornet can also draft other dolls to fight alongside her. It's pretty easy and fairly short, though the goofy songs, catchy musical numbers (done with sprites in the game engine – think the *Final Fantasy VI* opera scene but more ambitious), and hilarious localisation keep it amusing throughout.

There are three other games in the series, though none of these were released outside of Japan. The second game, *Little Princess*, takes place about 15 years after the first. Cornet and Ferdinand are married and have had their own child, nicknamed Kururu. This game is pretty similar to the first, though the battle system has changed to a side-view perspective, and removes the grid-based movement.



PlayStation
Rhapsody
ATLUS

The third game, *Tenshi no Present* ("Angel's Present") moves to the PlayStation 2, using 2D sprites over 3D backgrounds, like the *Disgaea* games. This is an anthology story, featuring five tales (plus one bonus), starring various characters from the *Marl Kingdom* saga. The funniest chapter lets you play as Marjoly, the villain from the first game. A DS remake of *Rhapsody* was released, and while the Japanese version contains a few of the scenarios from *Tenshi no Present* as bonuses, they were deleted from the English release. This version also changes to a battle system reminiscent of *Little Princess*.

The fourth and final game was released for the PSP, called *Antiphona no Seikahime* ("Antiphona the Holy Song Princess"). This sequel takes place centuries after the main series, with the premise that many elements of the world are powered by song, and starring a girl named Miabelle, who forms a band with a sisters, and swears to rescue her band-mate's stolen voice.

Later Nippon Ichi games reference the *Marl Kingdom* series – several cast members show up as guest bosses, the Rosenqueen family runs all of the stores, and the SRPG *La Pucelle* takes place in the same game world, though it's not technically part of the series.

The English-speaking media scoffed at *Rhapsody* at the time, as if the mere concept of women playing RPGs was an absurdity.

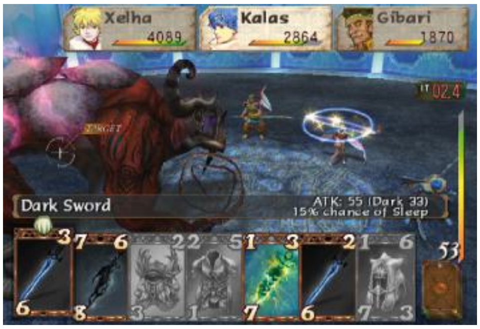
Baten Kaitos

Developer: Monolith Soft/tri-Crescendo | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): GC

Though best-known for the *Xenosaga* and *Xenoblade* series, Monolith Soft was also responsible for developing the *Baten Kaitos* games. Both were made specifically for the GameCube, which at the time suffered from a lack of quality role-playing experiences.

Rather than directly taking on the role of the protagonist, Kalas, the player instead takes on the role of a Guardian Spirit who helps guide him; the player is able to interact directly with Kalas through dialogue trees, and the characters will often ask the player directly what to do. The world is focused on magic cards known as Magnus, which allow people to store the essence of various things within them for later use. Prior to the events of the game, an ancient god known as Malpercio invaded the planet and removed the water from the oceans, before being sealed away by heroes using all-powerful cards known as End Magnus. After joining forces with a young woman, Xelha, Kalas inadvertently releases one of the End Magnus, which loosens the seal imprisoning Malpercio. The two are pursued by members of the Alfard Empire, who wish to use the End Magnus to release Malpercio for their own ends; Kalas eventually falls under the god's control himself, and more details about his past are slowly revealed to the other party members throughout the story.

The Magnus system is the most unique aspect of the game, with more than 1,000 different Magnus available. While some contain food to consume or equipment to use, others contain battle moves to be used in a deck. The game's battle system makes use of decks of Magnus, with the player responsible for assembling a deck for each party member to use in combat. Battles are turn-based, but on a timer – each character has an offensive and defensive turn, during which they have but a few seconds to choose a card to play. Certain cards can also be combined to create combos. This card-based system is unusual, since you have to play with the hand you're dealt, rather than having a full menu of actions, though it does give it a unique feel.



NINTENDO GAMECUBE
BATEN KAITOS
namco

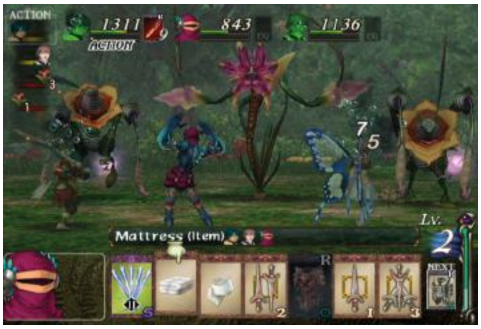
Baten Kaitos was co-directed by Yasuyuki Honne (who previously worked on *Chrono Trigger*, *Chrono Cross*, and *Xenogears*) and Hiroya Hatsushiba (the co-founder of tri-Crescendo). It was written by Masato Kato, who notably wrote for *Chrono Trigger* and *Xenogears*. Music for the game was handled by Motoi Sakuraba, who by then had established himself in RPG music, having already composed for the *Tales* and *Golden Sun* games, among many others. It's excellent, though the voiced dialogue has a strangely tinny sound. The pre-rendered backgrounds are gorgeously colourful, recalling the earlier PS1 *Chrono Cross*, albeit at a higher resolution.

Though the card-battle system can take some adjusting to, it's still a quality game. However, it fell short in sales, as most RPG players had gone with the PlayStation 2.

Aesthetically, *Baten Kaitos* is the follow-up to *Chrono Cross*, though otherwise, with its card-based battle system, it's very much its own thing.

Baten Kaitos Origins

Developer: Monolith Soft/tri-Crescendo | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): GC



NINTENDO GAMECUBE
BATEN KAITOS ORIGINS

In spite of the first *Baten Kaitos* title's financial under-performance, Monolith Soft and tri-Crescendo teamed up again for a prequel, *Baten Kaitos Origins*, which arrived in 2006. The game takes place some 20 years before the events of the original game, and follows a main character named Sagi. Sagi works for the Alfard Empire in its Dark Service unit, operating under Lord Baelheit. At the outset, the Dark Service is told to assassinate Emperor Olgan, though before they have the opportunity to do so, Olgan is murdered by another party, leaving Sagi and his partner Guillo to take the blame for it; they are rescued by a man named Geldoblame. Sagi and Guillo later team up with a young woman, Milly, and the trio sets out to both clear Sagi's name and discover the true nature of Alfard's ruling class.

The story eventually sees Sagi learn his own true history – he is the result of an experiment run by the Empire, in which Lord Baelheit tried to create artificial Spiriters who contained pieces of the powerful and evil god Malpercio. At the end of the game, Geldoblame ascends to the position of Alfard's new Emperor, and instructs his people to find the five End Magnus, setting up the events of the first *Baten Kaitos*.

Baten Kaitos Origins uses the same card-based battle system as the first title, though with some significant differences – each character pulls cards from a shared deck, rather than having individual decks, which simultaneously streamlines the battle process and forces the player to make more strategic decisions. Also, Battle Magnus cards no longer decay or change over time, as they did in the previous game.

Origins' creative team retained most of the members from the first title, with Yasuyuki Honne once again heading the project, and Motoi Sakuraba composing the game's soundtrack. Writing and scenario planning were taken over by Koh Kojima, who had worked on quest design for the first title; he went on to direct the *Xenoblade Chronicles* titles for Monolith Soft.

The game was released very late in the GameCube's life cycle. It's worth noting that *Origins* was published not by Namco, like the first game, but by Nintendo. The localisation team at Nintendo made one significant change in order not to offend Christian communities; the scene in the Japanese version in which Sagi is crucified was revised for the US version, so he's simply placed on a golden box. While many other GameCube titles under development around this time ended up being shifted to the Wii, *Baten Kaitos Origins* remained on the GameCube, as the developers believed that the Wii's motion controls were ill-suited for the game.

Like the first *Baten Kaitos*, *Origins* received some significant critical praise but didn't perform well commercially. The game is considered to be one of the last great RPGs on the system, and so far remains the last entry in the franchise.

Near the end of the GameCube's life, Nintendo of America brought out *Baten Kaitos Origins* in English, but it was almost completely ignored, in spite of being an improvement of its predecessor.

.hack (series)

Developer: CyberConnect2 | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): PS2, PS4, WIN

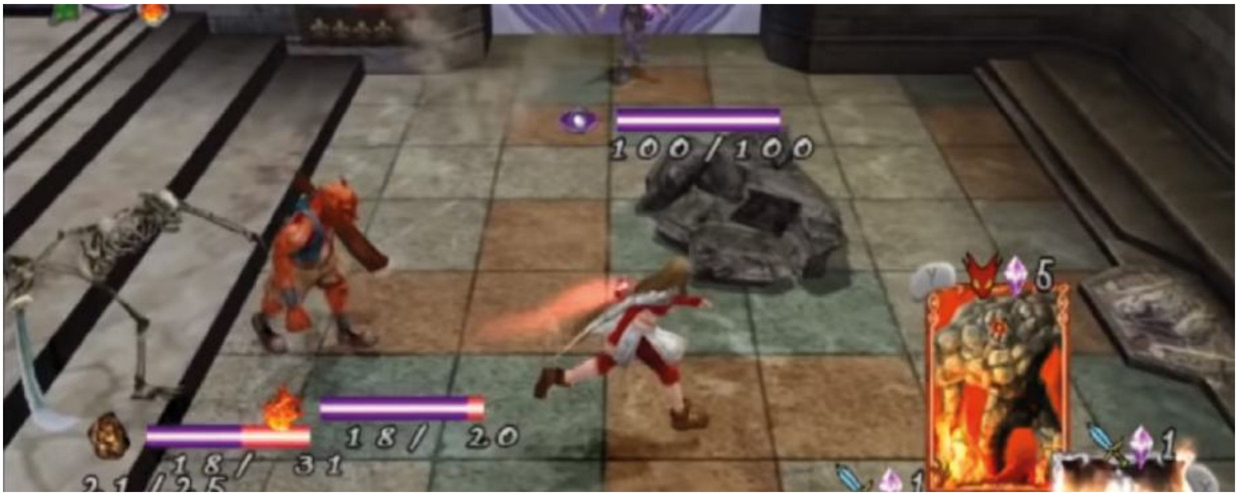
PS4
.hack//G.U.
Last Recode

The game series is just one part of the *.hack* multimedia project, which also included an anime TV series and a manga.

In the early 2000s, online gaming was in its infancy, with games like *Ultima Online* and *Phantasy Star Online* giving players a first glimpse of what was to come. But that glimpse came at a steep price: many people still went online via dial-up connections that charged by the minute. This was the environment in which *.hack* was created – not only as a series of games, but as a whole multimedia franchise including video games, trading card games, anime series, manga and novels. One of its creators was Hiroshi Matsuyama, who worked with anime-screenwriter Kazunori Itou (*Patlabor: The Movie*) and character designer Yoshiyuki Sadamoto (*Neon Genesis Evangelion*) to create *.hack*'s premise. The series is about an MMORPG called The World; when the player's best friend is attacked by a monster and falls into a coma, it's up to them to discover the cause, and find out what The World really is all about.

The original *.hack* for the PlayStation 2 is split into four episodes, subtitled *Infection*, *Mutation*, *Outbreak*, and *Quarantine;* each came with an additional DVD containing an episode of the four-part anime series *.hack//Liminality*. Having been developed back-to-back and released at three-month intervals, the game episodes all use the same engine and gameplay-systems, with little development or evolution between entries. In return, though, saved games carry over from one episode to the next. The games contain two elements. Everything happening in The World plays out in pretty classic action RPG fashion. Monsters spawn at portals and are fought in real-time, the players directly control the main character, Kite, while an AI looks after party members, although these can be given rough commands or direct orders. Battles feel a bit flimsy, due to a lack of direct feedback when attacking an enemy. When not fighting in the field or in dungeons, the players visit Root Towns, performing the usual RPG town activities. The main character stands out for his ability to hack monsters using Data Drain – a necessary skill, since The World is corrupted and many boss-enemies have become unbeatable. However, Data Drain takes a toll on the players and fills up an Infection indicator, which can be lowered by fighting enemies without using said Data Drain skills. Outside The World, players have access to their in-game desktops where they browse mails and message boards for new hints or information – an interesting aspect that really gives *.hack* an MMORPG-feeling.

This was followed up by another series called *.hack//G.U.*; this time the story is split into three separate games but, together, these are longer than the first series. The premise is quite similar. Starting seven years after the events of *.hack* and taking place once more in The World, another player's best friend is defeated by a person calling themselves Tri-Edge and falls into a coma; you train your own character, Haseo, in order to defeat Tri-Edge. The games are not accompanied by anime DVDs this time, but there are many smaller anime episodes there to be unlocked in the games themselves. An HD-remaster, subtitled *Last Recode*, was released in 2017, and includes an additional fourth episode.



Lost Kingdoms (series)

Developer: FromSoftware | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): GC

Years before it would revolutionise the RPG world with *Dark Souls*, FromSoftware was creating less famous series such as *King's Field* and *Armored Core*. Their *Lost Kingdoms* series was one of the few RPG franchises on the Nintendo GameCube.

The fairly simple story tells of a young princess named Katia, who goes out to discover the truth behind a nebulous black fog that is enveloping her kingdom. On her journey, she obtains runestones that enhance her card-casting powers, and soon she finds herself in a race to collect the runestones and defeat the God of Destruction before the world is completely brought to ruin. The story is somewhat lacking, but the unique real-time card-based combat system works to pull you into the land of Argwyll, and it's easy to see why.

This system is fairly easy to grasp. Three different card types mixed with five elements allow for an intuitive form of combat that allows you to build a deck around your preferred play style. Your options include weapon cards that provide a single strike from your position, independent cards which allow the creatures within to act freely on the battlefield, and summon cards which provide anything from buffs or healing to devastating attacks that could turn the tide of a tough battle. The elemental wheel functions similarly to *Fire Emblem*'s weapon triangle, with each element having different strengths and weaknesses in relation to other elements. For example, fire is strong against wood, but weak against water.

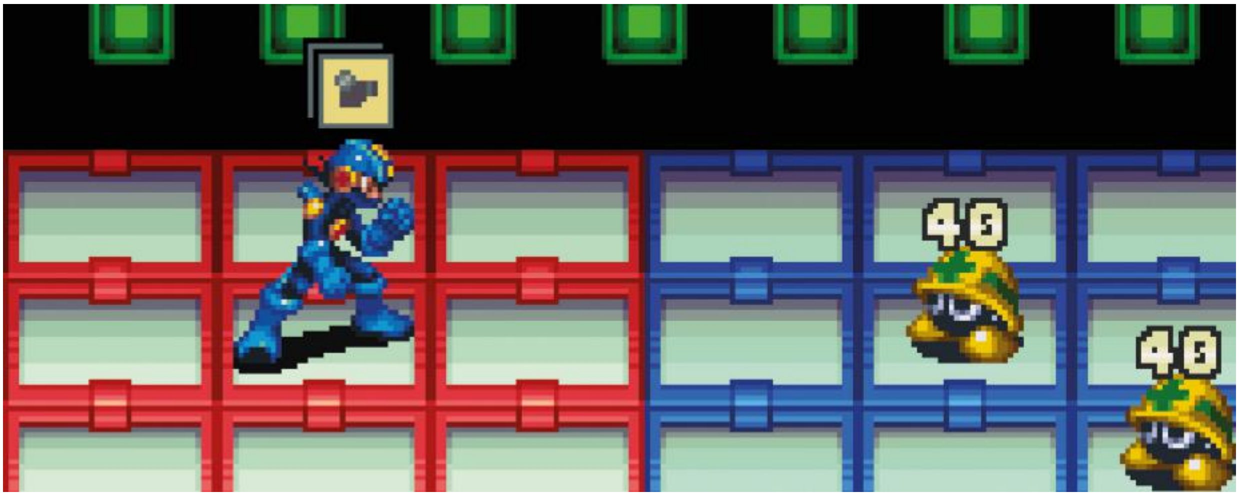
Outside of combat, the cards can be upgraded, transformed, bought, and sold to improve your deck as the game progresses. Using specific cards grants them experience, which allows them to transform into better versions of themselves, or new cards entirely. With a total of 105 cards in the game, the deck possibilities are fairly diverse, and discovering every card in the game takes strategic game and card play. Some cards can only be obtained via transformation, while others can be captured on the battlefield.

LOST KINGDOMS
ACTIVISION

The single-player content wasn't the only thing that drew people into *Lost Kingdoms*. A multiplayer mode incorporating a restriction system on certain cards is also accessible, functioning in a similar vein to trading card games like *Magic the Gathering* and *Yu-Gi-Oh*.

Ultimately, *Lost Kingdoms* as a franchise wouldn't go very far. A single sequel was released a year later, and while it built on the original game's mechanics and doubled the cards in the game, this wasn't enough to make it a new staple of the RPG world. However, while it may now only seem like a footnote in the GameCube's library of RPGs, it was one of the first true flashes of brilliance out of FromSoftware – a flash that a decade later would coalesce into one of the most influential RPGs of all time.

Between *Baten Kaitos* and *Lost Kingdoms*, the GameCube certainly had cornered the market in card-themed battle systems.



Mega Man: Battle Network / Star Force (series)

Developer: Capcom | Released: 2001 | Platform(s): GBA, DS, 3DS

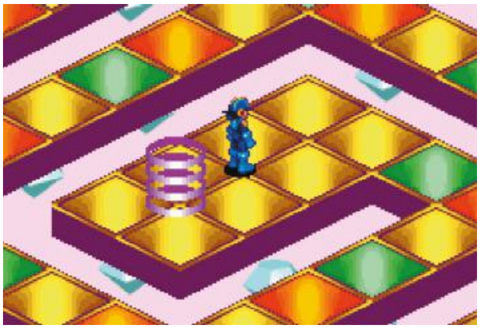
Capcom's *Mega Man* saw a number of reinventions over the years – starting as an Astro Boy-type character, it received a soft reboot with the darker and edgier *Mega Man X* series for the SNES. When it hit the Game Boy Advance, it split off twice more, staying with the familiar side-scrolling action in *Mega Man Zero*, and dipping its toes into role-playing with *Mega Man Battle Network*.

In *Battle Network*, the titular blue bomber has been turned into a NetNavi, a human-controlled digital being that explores the internet, interacting through UIs, getting involved in hacking stories about cyber terrorists, super viruses, and for some reason, space computers. The protagonist in this game is a boy named Lan, an average adolescent in the near future, who spends his days hanging around the suburbs and attending classes. It's a weird idea, but it works, and creates a ton of fun characters and neat takes on classic *Mega Man* robots, with recurring antagonist Bass getting a major upgrade as an edgy rogue super-Navi.

In the human world, you control Lan, solving puzzles built around getting to jack points, and then sending Mega Man.EXE into the web to fight viruses and evil Navis that are up to no-good tricks, like making washing machines explode or stoves light on fire. Fights play out on two 3 × 3 grids, yours and your enemy's, and you take shots at each other while you wait for the meter to fill. This gives access to your menu of chips, which are like cards, granting you attack, support, or even summon, moves, each having different ranges; these can be mixed together in creative ways.

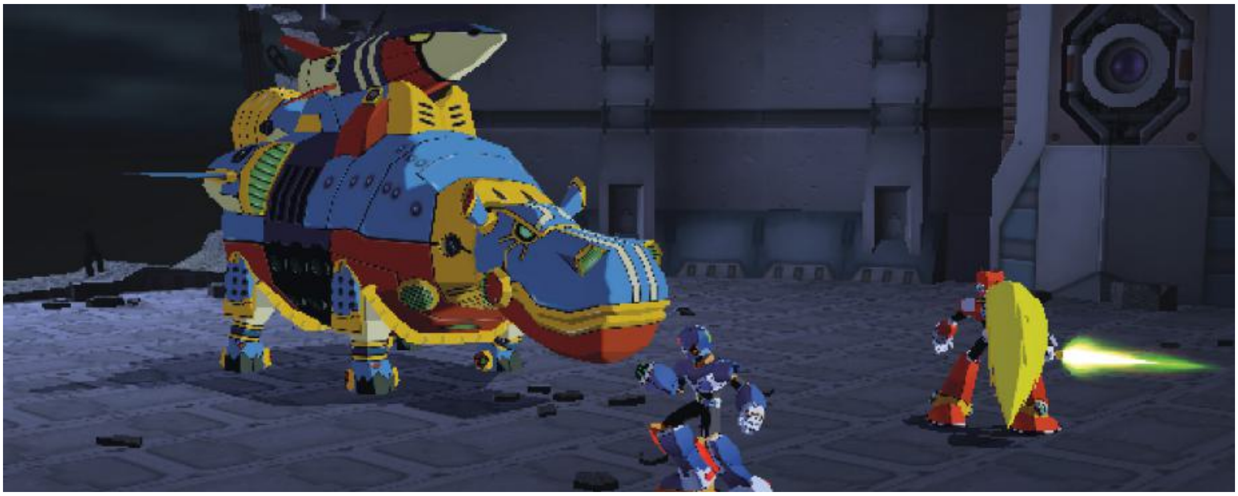
It's a fun concept that works well on handheld systems, and the stories often get into some strong character drama, demonstrating surprising depths in the heroes and villains alike. Mega Man.EXE's origin alone is absolutely bonkers. From the third entry, the series was released *Pokémon*-style, dividing into two different versions with different chips to encourage trading, though it didn't have the same draw. *Battle Network* on the GBA ended after six numbered titles, the later three being generally seen as lesser games, half-baked in story and mechanics, but they were serviceable. There was also a platformer spinoff, *Network Transmission*, and the underwhelming strategy game *Battle Chip Challenge*.

The series evolved into *Mega Man: Star Force* in the 3DS era, with three releases, using a new grid layout, an over-the-shoulder perspective, and cards instead of chips. There's also a new battle-mode transformation gimmick, and the sequels introduce physical, real world cards for Japanese players that unlock extra content. This series also has a much stranger concept, based around electromagnetic waves and alien invaders, and never got the same praise *Battle Network* did. Both series wrapped up in 2009 with the Japan-only *Rockman.EXE Operate Shooting Star*, which was just an updated version of the original *Battle Network* with an added *Star Force* chapter. Each franchise also got anime and manga adaptations.



MEGAMAN
BATTLE NETWORK
GAME BOY ADVANCE
E
CAPCOM

Reimagining Mega Man as a virus-busting artificial intelligence is a brilliant concept, though it's very much on brand for Capcom to run it into the ground.



Mega Man X: Command Mission

Developer: Capcom | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): PS2, GC

With their experimental *Battle Network* series proving to be a big hit, Capcom tried to pull a Nintendo, à la *Paper Mario*, and turn their main mascot into an RPG star. Unfortunately, they produced so much *Battle Network*, of increasingly poor quality, that people got sick of the franchise, and *Star Force* failed to establish itself. The only other experiment they tried was making a more traditional turn-based JRPG as part of the *Mega Man X* series, which was itself in rocky waters due to some lacklustre entries. That gave us *Command Mission*, which was made mainly by staff from *Mega Man X7* and *Breath of Fire: Dragon Quarter*, which also happened to be two of the most disliked games in their respective franchises (though rather unfairly in the latter case). The end result is ... okay.

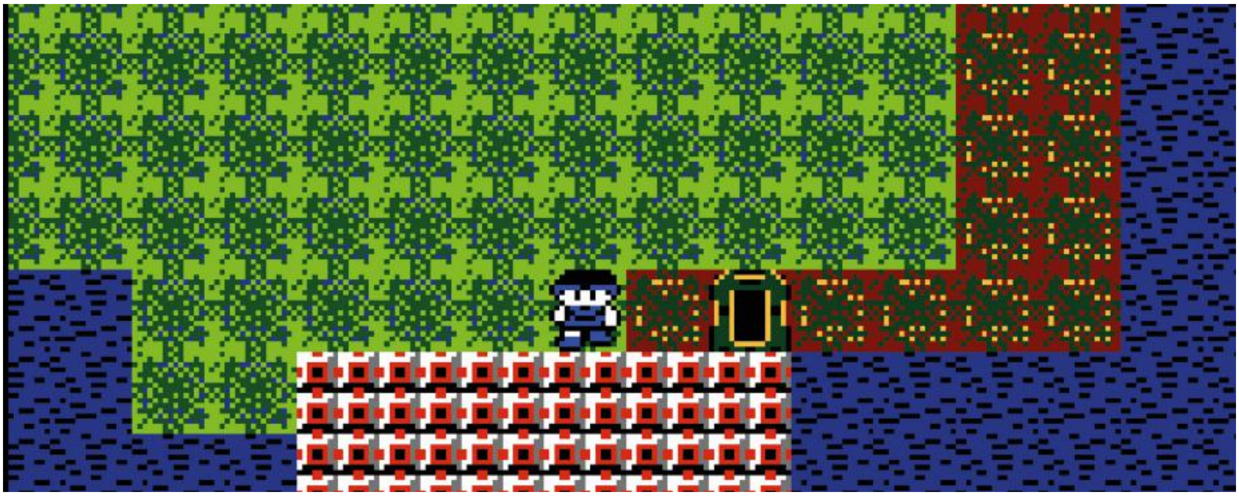
The stories in the core *Mega Man X* games are typically simple – they are side-scrolling action games, first and foremost – and *Command Mission* uses a similar template. A powerful substance called Force Metal is discovered, and an island called Giga City created to mine it. The City's leader, Epsilon, goes maverick, so X and his pal Zero are sent in to take on the problem. There are also a handful of new android pals that come along for the ride. The main *X* series had a bad habit of just making Sigma the villain, yet again, in end game twists. That was avoided here, but a mixture of a bad translation and a poor script results in a confusing narrative. A few of the character arcs are okay, and there's an interesting idea here and there, but a low-grade dub doesn't help things. X also remains the least interesting part of his own franchise, being a stoic hero who just kind of goes along with things because the plot requires it, instead of expressing any agency.

The battle system is basic, but has a fun hook in its hyper modes. Every party member has a meter that rises during battle, which can activate a hyper mode, which in turn allows you some special super-move or state. For example, big guy Massimo focuses on damage, while the thief, Marino, gets a massive speed boost, and the card-themed Spider goes invisible and becomes harder to hit. Many moves also have action commands associated with them, like charging X's buster, but they're a far cry from the *Paper Mario* series' more involved system.

What has given the game some buzz, even years later, is the cel-shaded art style. It still looks quite good to this day, even if the maps are barren and repetitive. There were also some big differences between the PS2 and GameCube versions, with the former getting a demo of *Mega Man X8*, but the latter getting an entirely new mechanic, using the GBA connect cable, that can find you more items. It also benefitted from the more powerful system, with a better frame-rate and loading times. The trade off is that the encounter rate is much higher, making this version a massive slog. *Command Mission* is more of an interesting curiosity than anything else, but for something made several years into the sixth gen console cycle, the cheapness of the whole experience is hard to ignore.

PlayStation 2
MEGAMAN X
COMMAND MISSION
CAPCOM

This more grown-up RPG take on Mega Man only got a single chance to shine, and didn't quite make it.



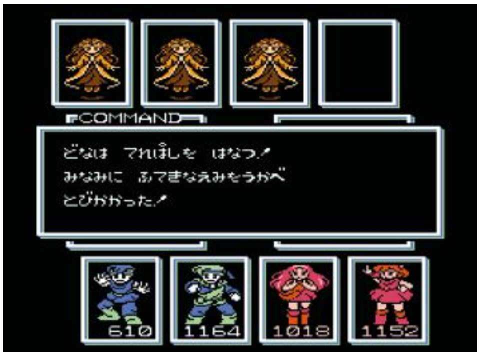
Hoshi wo Miru Hito

Developer: Hot-B | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): FC

Hoshi wo Miru Hito ("Stargazer") takes place in a futuristic world, where humans live peaceful lives within Ark City. It is ruled by the computer Crew III, which uses mind control powers to quell any criminal thoughts in its populace. However, humans with psychic powers ("espers") are immune to these effects, seen as dangerous, and hunted down. You control one such person, an amnesiac esper named Minami, and must fight back against this injustice. The game is a follow-up to an earlier PC RPG from Hot-B called *Psychic City*, which had a similar setup.

This is certainly a pretty cool concept for an RPG ... but *Hoshi wo Miru Hito* is just a disaster of legendary proportions. Firstly, the graphics are ugly: just a shocking mess of tiles that look terrible on their own, and even worse when matched together. Right from the beginning, the game barely makes any sense, since almost every place on the map – towns, dungeons, etc. – is invisible ("hidden by psychic powers", apparently). Movement is so extraordinarily sluggish that just catching up to the townspeople to talk to them is a chore. When you leave, you'll get teleported to some random part of the overworld map. Some of these things seem like obvious bugs that were given an ad-hoc storyline justification, since it was much easier than fixing them.

The battle system is programmed with the same level of carelessness. Extremely tough enemies can be encountered right at the beginning of the game, and completely demolish you without even giving you a fighting chance. There's no way to run from battles at this stage either, as that requires a special Teleport skill you don't get until later on. For some reason, the system truncates the last digit when reporting damage – for example, inflicting 16 HP will be reported as 1 instead. There's no way to cancel out of menus, so if you choose the ESP command by accident, there's no way to back out and choose to attack instead.

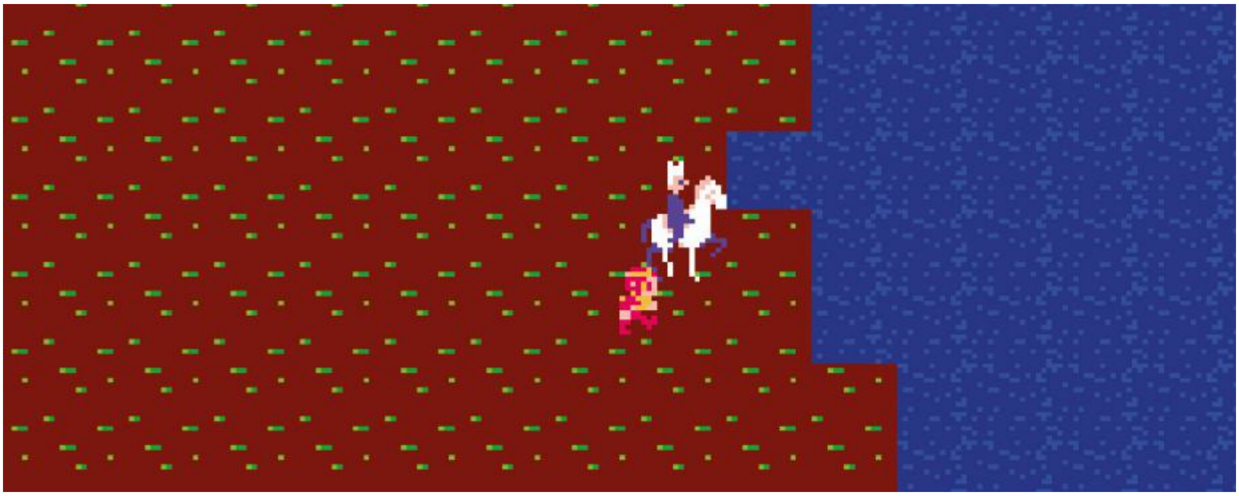


どなは てれぱしを はなつ!
みなみに ふてきなえみをうかべ
とびかかった!

There's no story in-game – the basic premise is in the manual, to be fair – and very little direction either. Most gamers will probably be killed before they even see the first town. One Famicom review said that "without a guide, all you can do is 'walk' and 'die'".

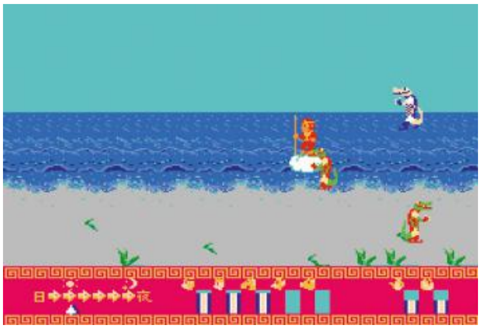
Over the years, there have been attempts to patch the game ROM to improve the visuals and fix both its glitches and atrocious game balance, plus one attempt to totally remake it. Plus, science fiction RPGs were uncommon at the time – it predates SEGA's *Phantasy Star* by a few months and Konami's *Lagrange Point* by a number of years. It's quite ambitious, so it's a shame that it's basically unplayable. Nonetheless, it's terribleness has become so legendary that the game was resurrected in 2020 by City Connection, a company specialising in retro products. It's not a remake so much as a tuned-up emulation, but it's amusing that enough ironic affection has built up over 30+ years to justify this effort.

Fans have made some attempts to remake *Hoshi wo Miru Hito* to make it playable, which shows how good the original concept was.



Ganso Saiyuuki: Super Monkey Daibouken

Developer: Techno Quest | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): FC



Competing with *Hoshi wo Miru Hito* for the title of "worst RPG on the Famicom", here's *Ganso Saiyuuki: Super Monkey Daibouken* ("The Original Journey to the West: Super Monkey Great Adventure"). In this one of the many versions of The Journey to the West, you control Son Goku the Monkey King as he leads the monk Genjo and his steed from China to India.

"Nagai tabi ga hajimaru ..." ("The long journey begins ..."), proclaims the opening text. And boy, are they not kidding. The game world is estimated to contain approximately 700 screens, depicting many small, isolated islands, and your caravan moves approximately a single square per second. The landscapes seem to have been designed with no real coherence, and the gates to the next area are often invisible until you're right on top of them, forcing you to tediously comb each and every square until you're warped somewhere else. Worse, just because you find another area doesn't mean that it's the correct one – it can just as easily send you to a section which appears to be a dead end. Time passes on a day-night cycle, which is impressive for a console RPG from 1986, but some gates only appear at specific times. It's all quite maddening. You're also constantly consuming food in the process, and indeed, you can starve to death.

Every once in a while, the game will appear to glitch up, and all of a sudden you'll find yourself in the middle of a side-scrolling action battle sequence. These are impenetrably designed and programmed, as sprites move around the screen in ways that are only comprehensible by madmen, and game rules like "hit detection" cease to have meaning. Son Goku is the primary warrior, if only because he seems to have the most health, but if he gets killed, the other party members – the king and his transforming horse in the early stages of the game; later a pig and a kappa – will resume in his stead.

Then, just as abruptly as the battle began, the game dumps you back into the overworld without any warning, usually long before any of the enemies are actually dead. Indeed, it's one of the few cartridge-based games that has noticeable loading times. This process repeats until your party either runs out of food or you stumble across a town to replenish your supplies.

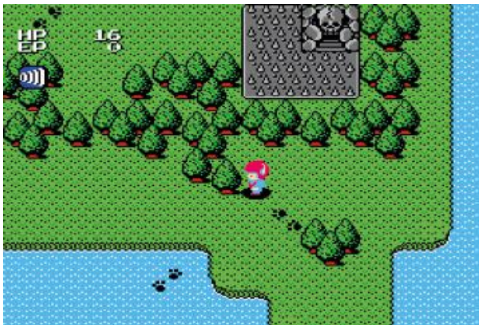
The most sadly hilarious bit is a message hidden in the ROM, which details a lonely programmer's desire for some loving, written in a form that is somewhat less eloquent than a traditional sonnet. ("I want a perverted girl. I love vagina! I love clitoris!") Such ridiculousness is appropriate for such a sad game.

The game was developed by Techno Quest, a subsidiary of Taito that worked primarily in computer graphics. Its first video game was the laserdisc title *Rolling Blaster;* its second (and last) was this, created because the staff were fans of assorted role-playing games, like *Ultima* and *Mugen no Shinzou.*

Compared to *Hoshi wo Miru Hito*, there is little worth salvaging about *Super Monkey Daibouken*, which is instead relegated to the status of 8-bit torture device.

Esper Dream

Developer: Konami | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): FDS



ESPER DREAM
エスパードリーム

Esper Dream is one of the numerous Famicom Disk System games from Konami that remained exclusive to Japan.

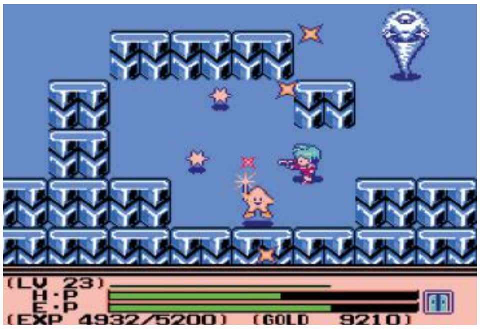
During the ’80s, Japan had a fascination with espers – people with extra sensory perception, or ESP – and thus there were a number of manga, anime and games featuring this theme. Among them is Konami’s action RPG *Esper Dream*, released for the Famicom Disk System in 1987, in which you control a young boy who has been transported into his favourite book.

The centre of the game is Brick Town, which connects the various disparate worlds. The first world, for example, is in someone’s house, although the surroundings are very large (or perhaps you are very tiny), and the sub-dungeons require delving into computers, where the walls consist of computer chips. There’s a standard RPG-type field, with green fields and blue oceans, along with a crystal castle, a maze of swamplands, and a world based on chess. Enemies include ladybugs, flying fish, winged monkeys, pelicans, house plants, moai heads, and other random assorted nonsense. Wandering sets of footprints represent enemies, and when you touch one, you’re whisked away to a separate arena to do battle. These segments are action-based, and you can attack with weapons like pistols, lasers, and bazookas, or using your psychic powers.

The action is cumbersome, as your character can only walk in four directions, and rather slowly at that, plus it is quite grindy and the encounters are repetitive. But the setting is an interesting departure from normal fantasy, the music, by *Castlevania* composer Kinuyo Yamashita, is pleasant, and it’s different enough from the *Zelda* clones typical of the era to make it worth a look.

Esper Dream 2

Developer: Konami | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): FC



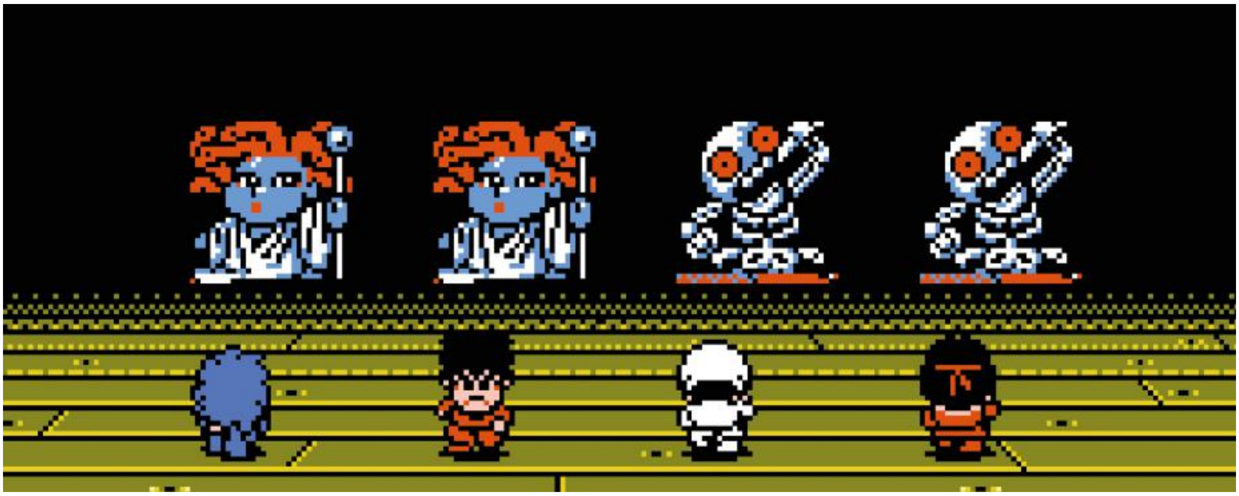
エスパードリーム2
新たなる戦い
KONAMI

Released five years after the first _Esper Dream_, and long after the death of the Famicom Disk System, this sequel is better in every possible way.

The first *Esper Dream* came at the beginning of the Famicom RPG rush, while its sequel *Esper Dream 2: Aratanaru Tatakai* (“A New Battle”), released five years later in 1992, was one of the last. The setup is similar – you’re a young boy who can wield an assortment of psychic powers, who is transported into the worlds of various stories.

There are four worlds in total. One of them is a quiet seaside town, where their light-giving orb gets stolen by a mysterious entity. Another is a *Galaxy Express 999*-style train which flies through outer space and is being terrorised by a giant bunny rabbit. There’s a magnet factory, which is entirely inhabited by living nuts and bolts, and a glowing mountain, which is being terrorised by Fuujin and Raijin, the Japanese gods of wind and lightning. These scenarios have more story and are far more fleshed out than the “explore dungeons, find junk” ones in the original game. Combat is similar, but faster and more fluid, and gold drops are more generous, so it’s less grindy. Although you start out in every world by yourself, each contains a unique helper who will accompany you in battle, governed by the computer. These include a train conductor, an anthropomorphic screw, and a happy little star.

Along with *Akumajou Densetsu* and *Madara*, *Esper Dream 2* is one of the three Famicom games that use Konami’s VRC6 chip, which enables not only improved graphical effects but also greatly enhanced music. Overall, *Esper Dream 2* takes practically every single aspect of its predecessor and fixes most of its problems, resulting in an outstanding title that could easily compete with the early 16-bit titles of the day.



Ganbare Goemon Gaiden (series)

Developer: Konami | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): FC

Ganbare Goemon was one of Konami's most prolific franchises through much of its life, even outpacing better-known series like *Castlevania*. The few titles that made it overseas were redubbed *Mystical Ninja*. Starring a goofy version of folk hero Ishikawa Goemon, the series ostensibly takes place in feudal Japan, but often incorporates ridiculous anachronisms (time travel, space adventuring, mechas) and has a haphazard "anything goes" approach that was consistently amusing, even if the quality of the games varied wildly.

It generated a spinoff series for the Famicom, consisting of two straight turn-based RPGs. *Ganbare Goemon Gaiden: Kieta Ougon Kiseru* ("The Disappearance of the Golden Pipe") sends Goemon and his pal Ebisumaru off to find out who stole one of his greatest treasures. It introduces a few characters seen in later *Goemon* games, like the ninja gal Yae and a cat named Koban Neko. Other characters include Pemo Pemo, an alien that looks like a robotic dogu clay figurine, who becomes a playable character in the sequel. Goemon and his gang are also chased around by an angry, Godzilla-sized robot woman. Battles are played out like those in *Dragon Quest*, but the sprites, backgrounds, and animations are more elaborate than anything seen in those games. There are some quality-of-life improvements too, like rocket skates that let you move faster, and the ability to save anywhere. Rather than visiting the king, à la *Dragon Quest*, you can learn about the experience needed to gain a level by visiting a phone booth.

The sequel, *Tenka no Zaihou* ("Treasures of the World") has Goemon and Ebisumaru leaving Japan behind to search the globe for eight keys in order to win a tournament. The adventures will take you to all kinds of ridiculous places, like an island made of food, and have you climbing a gigantic staircase all the way to the moon, which is inhabited by rabbits (owing to the Japanese belief that an image of a rabbit pounding rice can be seen on the moon's face). It even transcends the boundaries of video games by including Dr. Cinnamon from the *TwinBee* shoot-'em-up games, and drafting Simon Belmont from the *Castlevania* series as a playable party member. There's even a thief based on the famous Arsène Lupin literary figure. The battle system switches to a third-person perspective, making it a little more visually engaging than before, though it mostly works the same way.

While the core *Goemon* series consisted of mostly action games, it also experimented with RPG elements; some closely resembled platformers like *Super Mario World* and others were more adventure-like, similar to *The Legend of Zelda*. As the mainline Super Famicom games continued, they developed stronger narratives, so Konami likely felt that there was no longer any need to continue the series in the framework of a *Dragon Quest*-type game. The company didn't seem to have much interest in RPGs for this period anyway, leaving these spinoffs as relics of the 8-bit era.

The core *Ganbare Goemon* titles are action games with some RPG elements, while these *Gaiden* spinoff games are pure Japanese RPGs.

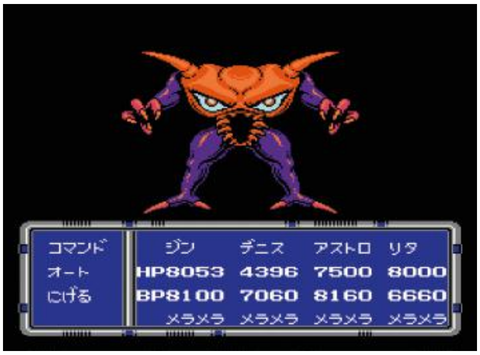
Lagrange Point

Developer: Konami | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): FC

In the future, mankind has begun to expand into outer space, starting at one of Earth's lagrange points. The first two colonies, called Land-1 and Land-2, along with a neighbouring satellite, form the Isis Cluster. Disaster has struck Land-2, so the hero, Jin, is sent in to investigate, only to be attacked by mechanical troops immediately upon arrival. Once he's recovered, it's up to you to investigate what exactly went down, which involves a biohazard outbreak and a coup d'état.

Released in 1991, *Lagrange Point* was competing against 16-bit RPGs, and to compensate, it is something of a technical marvel. It features large character sprites, fancy screen-tearing battle transitions, and the first-person battle scenes have cool lighting effects that simulate speeding through a tunnel. If it weren't for the limited colour palette, it could easily pass as a PC Engine game. Konami was also particularly in love with sound hardware, and some Famicom cartridges included extra sound chips to bolster their soundtracks. This is the only title to use the company's VRC7 chip, which includes an FM synthesiser, resulting in a Famicom game that sounds like no other.

To play, this is a pretty standard 8-bit RPG, with some cool sci-fi elements. All attacks (just not super-attacks or magic spells), drain Battery Points, which are refilled from tanks found throughout the game, and restored at save points. Since the game takes place on cylindrical colonies, the overworld map wraps around vertically, and to give it some scale, all travel here is handled using vehicles. Among the several party members, there are three character types – humans, cyborgs, and robots – each with their own equipment types and status afflictions. For example, humans and cyborgs can become overwhelmed by emotions, while robots are subject to rusting. There's also a system to customise and fuse weapon types, which is pretty complex for an 8-bit RPG. The mutant enemy designs walk the line between terrifying and silly – some were the result of a user submission contest in *Famimaga* magazine, which also contributed other things, from enemy designs to snippets of dialogue. The soundtrack also comes from a variety of sources, including a few tracks from J-rock band Rebecca, as well some reader submissions. Masashi Hamauzu, later the composer of *Final Fantasy XIII*, won an award, though his work was unused in the game.



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コマンド     ジン   デニス   アストロ  リタ
オート    HP8053  4396   7500   8000
にげる    BP8100  7060   8160   6660
           メラメラ メラメラ メラメラ メラメラ
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The closest analogue to *Lagrange Point* is SEGA's *Phantasy Star*, given their outer-space settings, though this one has more science fiction elements. However, due to the character designs, it still feels somewhat child-oriented, and it's missing the heavy emotional resonance that came with *Phantasy Star*'s drama. But otherwise, its novel setting and impressive sound and visuals work together to create one of the better Famicom RPGs.

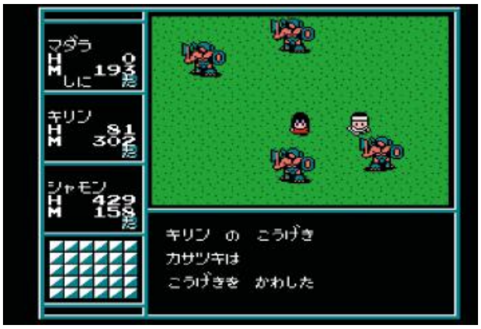
By 1991, the Famicom had to compete with the newer 16-bit consoles, resulting in technical marvels like *Lagrange Point*.

Mouryou Senki Madara (series)

Developer: Konami | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): FC, SFC

Mouryou Senki Madara ("Madara: War Chronicles of the Nature Spirits") was an ambitious multimedia franchise that began in 1987 with a manga written by Eiji Ohtsuka and illustrated by Sho Tajima. It aimed to tell 108 different stories across assorted manga, video games, and anime, although it never got anywhere near that number of tales. The anime OVA, as well as a few chapters of the manga, were translated into English. One of the stories focuses on a boy named Madara, who was dismembered and sent floating down a river. Adopted by the kind rural folks, he is given artificial limbs and lives a relatively normal life. That is, until he comes of age and must discover his true origins, which involves him exploring the land to find his original body parts, which were given to demons. Though the story is based on a fantasy version of Asian culture, it also has some light elements of sci-fi, which gives it a unique feel.

This particular scenario was used as the basis for a Famicom RPG from Konami. It adapts part of the manga, but since the latter was still being written at the time of production, the later part of the adventure is original. Like many of its ilk, it's very similar to *Dragon Quest*, though it comes with a few unique systems. Combat is presented from an overhead view, à la *Ultima III*. In it, your party members fight automatically, governed by an AI, though at any point you can pause to issue specific orders before resuming combat. In other words, it's similar to the "Real Time With Pause" battle system popularised later in the decade by PC RPGs from Bioware. Also, time passes during your journey, but rather than just switching from day to night, à la *Dragon Quest III* and *IV*, it actually cycles through seasons. But the main draw is the inclusion of the VRC6 memory mapper, which includes an extra sound chip providing more music channels. There were only three Famicom titles that used this chip, the other two being the action RPG *Esper Dream 2* and the famous *Akumajou Densetsu*, known internationally as *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*. It adds a richness to the music, bolstered by Konami's typically excellent compositions – the second overworld theme, in particular, is brilliant.



キリン の こうげき
カサツキは
こうげきを かわした

Konami followed this up with a Super Famicom sequel, which features an original scenario and some of the characters from the manga. The main characters – punk rocker Han Kamishiro and his girlfriend Subaru – are modern Japanese teenagers who learn they are reincarnations of Madara and his protector Kirin, after which they are sucked into the alternative fantasy world. The battle system is similar to that in the Famicom game, though it uses slightly more normally-proportioned characters instead of the super-deformed ones found in many RPGs of the era. Also like its predecessor, it has a brilliant soundtrack – it's by Tappi Iwase, Hirofumi Taniguchi, and Miki Higashino, a group of musicians who later went on to work on *Suikoden*. A third game, *Madara Saga*, was released for the SFC, though this is an unrelated game by Datam Polystar.

While none of the *Madara* RPGs were released outside of Japan, some of the manga has been translated into English.

Sweet Home

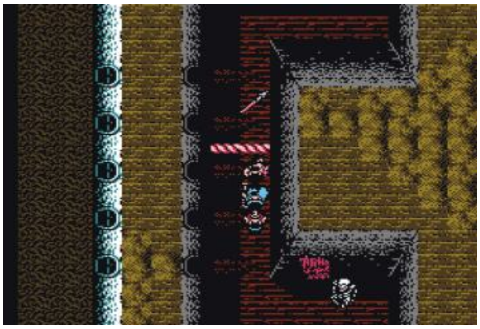
Developer: Capcom | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): FC

Tales have long been told of the beautiful frescos hidden within the abandoned mansion of artist Ichirou Mamiya. You control a group of filmmakers who have broken in for the purpose of making a documentary. Predictably, the place is haunted, and the team is trapped inside, forced to face off against its monstrosities before they can escape with their lives.

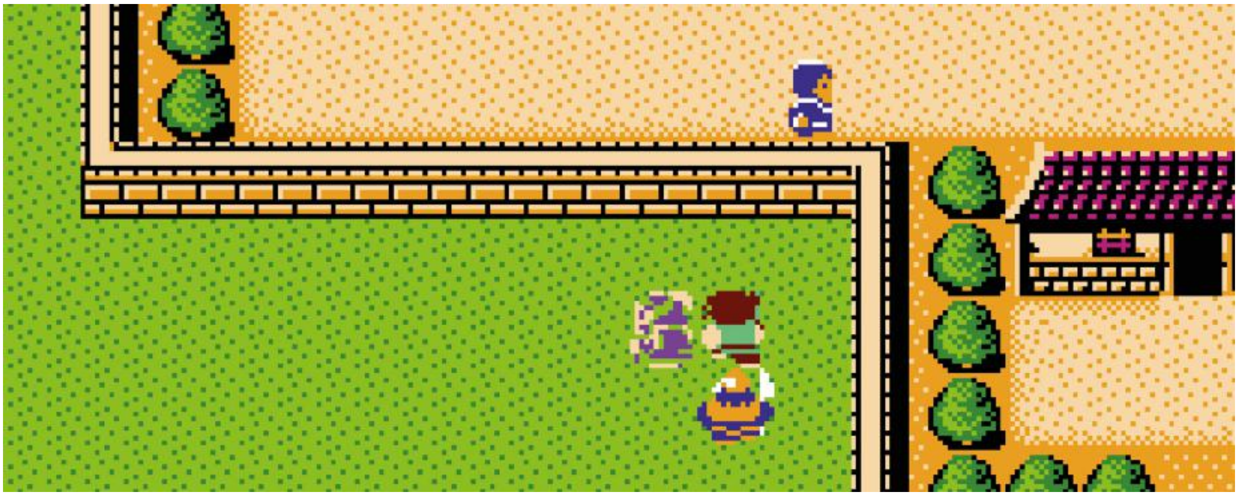
Sweet Home is based on the 1989 Japanese horror film of the same name. Considered in isolation, said film is a pretty standard B-movie with cheesy effects, and would probably be forgotten by history. (Indeed, it never even got a DVD release.) The Famicom tie-in, however, is one of the most historically important horror games ever made. Directed by Tokuro Fujiwara, the creator of Capcom's *Ghosts 'n Goblins*, among many other classic properties, it's a unique blend of adventure and RPG that heavily influenced the company's later *Resident Evil* series.

In the game, each of the five characters has their own ability – one has a key to unlock certain doors, another has a vacuum to clean up debris, another has a lighter to burn obstacles, and so forth. Their goal is to hunt for, and photograph, the various frescoes, which give clues on how to proceed. They can explore separately or team up (in parties of up to three) to hunt for objects that will help them further explore the mansion, like wood planks to cross chasms, as well as weapons to bolster their combat abilities. Battles are random and fairly straightforward *Dragon Quest*-type encounters. You can call out to any other party members to have them run in and join combat, and can also use the Pray command to help save your fellow members if they're ensnared by enemies. There are also status ailments, which are each curable with an antidote held by one of the characters. Various traps can also be sprung, requiring quick decisions to be made in an attempt to avoid them. However, health can only be regained with tonics, strewn in limited number about the mansion. When characters die, they're dead permanently, and while they leave behind items that let you continue the game, there are several different endings based on who's alive when you get there. The death sequences are quite gruesome for an 8-bit game, as are some of the creepier enemies.

These visuals are effective, which with the ever-present enemies and dwindling resources, make this a truly scary experience. You can save at any time, useful as you can find yourself overwhelmed and needing to restart. Luckily, the game isn't very long, and can be beaten in a few hours if you know what you're doing. The basic concept, along with direct borrowings such as the creepy first-person cutscene whenever you open a door, influenced the later *Resident Evil* games. In practice, *Sweet Home* is a little clumsy, since you need to switch back and forth between the many characters so often, and juggle items between them. But its effectiveness as both a horror game as well as genre ground-breaker cannot be denied.



***Sweet Home* is quite gory for an 8-bit game – even if Capcom had elected to bring out in English, without major edits, it most likely would have fallen foul of US and European Nintendo content guidelines.**

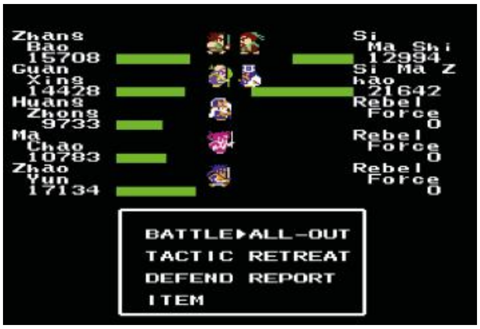


Destiny of an Emperor (series)

Developer: Capcom | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): NES, GB, SFC

Capcom didn't dabble much in RPGs during the 8-bit era – outside of their horror game *Sweet Home*, they had *Destiny of an Emperor*, based loosely on the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. It tells the story of Liu Bei, Zhang Fei, and Guan Yu, three generals who join forces to quell the Yellow Turban rebels. The game presents this journey as a *Dragon Quest*-style RPG, as your army explores 2nd century China, goes from town to town, and recruits more generals to join its cause. There are a huge number of these to recruit – 150 in total.

The key difference here lies in the battle system, as your army doesn't fight monsters in random encounters, but rather skirmishes with opposing forces. Your army is shown on the left side, while the enemy is on the right; though both have Hit Points, these indicate the size of the unit's army rather than its health, which naturally goes down as they trade blows. Rather than magic, there are Tactics, chosen by activating the skills of tactician characters. Up to five units on each side can battle at once. Given the lengthy nature of these battles, in which you input commands every turn, there's an All-Out option which will auto-battle to resolve encounters much more quickly. Defeated generals may also join your side, if you can meet their demands. In addition to keeping up your army's numbers, you also need to keep them well fed, by monitoring your food supplies, which decrease with every step.



The graphics are slightly better than in *Dragon Quest*, though the interface is less cumbersome, and your party moves around more quickly. The music is excellent, and actually sounds a lot like the NES *DuckTales*, owing to their shared composer, Hiroshige Tonomura. A few other big Capcom names worked on this game, including producer Tokuro Fujiwara (*Ghosts 'n Goblins*) and designer Yoshiki Okamoto (*Final Fight*, *Street Fighter II*).

There was a sequel for the Famicom as well, which adds a stronger narrative but scales back the recruitment mechanic, and makes other irritating changes like making your party move more slowly. The result is a game with a slightly better story (it's pretty threadbare in the original game) but is worse in most other aspects. A Game Boy game was also released, which is technically an original entry but has similarities to the first game. However, it is trimmed down in a few ways, notably by reducing the fights to three-on-three rather than five-on-five. Another game, *Tenchi wo Kurau: Sangokushi Gunyuuden* was released for the Super Famicom, but it's more of a strategy sim.

Considering the source material, it's a wonder that *Destiny of the Emperor* was actually released in English. It's actually part of a larger series based on a manga called *Tenchi wo Kurau* ("Devour the Heavens and Earth"). Capcom also developed two arcade games based on the series, which were beat-'em-ups known internationally as *Dynasty Wars* and *Warriors of Fate*.

CAPCOM
Destiny of an Emperor

***Destiny of an Emperor* is based on the same Chinese epic as Koei's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, though it's more of a console-RPG take on the formula, rather than a strategy sim.**

Radia Senki: Reimeihen

Developer: Tecmo | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): FC

In *Radia Senki: Reimeihen* ("Chronicles of the Radia War: Dawn Chapter"), you control an amnesiac hero caught in a battle between the kingdoms of Lemuria and Samara, for control of the powerful Radia Tower. Caught in the middle is Princess Lefis of the legendary kingdom of Ark, whose plane is shot down in the game's introduction. This setup is all well-trodden RPG territory, but the game itself is anything but, showing itself to be remarkably progressive in its design.

Fundamentally, *Radia Senki* blends together something like *Final Fantasy* with an action-based battle system in the style of *The Legend of Zelda*, except with multiple allied characters. When you encounter enemies, the screen locks in and you need to beat them all up before you can continue. You only directly control the hero, while your companions are governed by AI and fight of their own accord. You can also pause and give some individual orders, so this is not entirely at the whim of the computer. From a functional perspective, it's plenty rough – the walking speed is pretty slow, you can only move in four directions, and the hero can't do much beyond stabbing things. Plus your companions tend to be pretty dumb – it is an 8-bit game after all. But it's also an early example of this kind of system, as used in better-known RPGs like *Star Ocean* and *Secret of Mana*. There are other neat little touches too – instead of running away to avoid combat, you can opt to play dead, in hopes that the bad guys will leave you alone (it doesn't always work, of course). Foes don't really leave money either, so instead you need to sell their hides for cash. There's also an abundance of curatives to ensure that your fellow combatants don't get themselves too beaten up. In general, outside of boss battles, the game isn't all that difficult either.

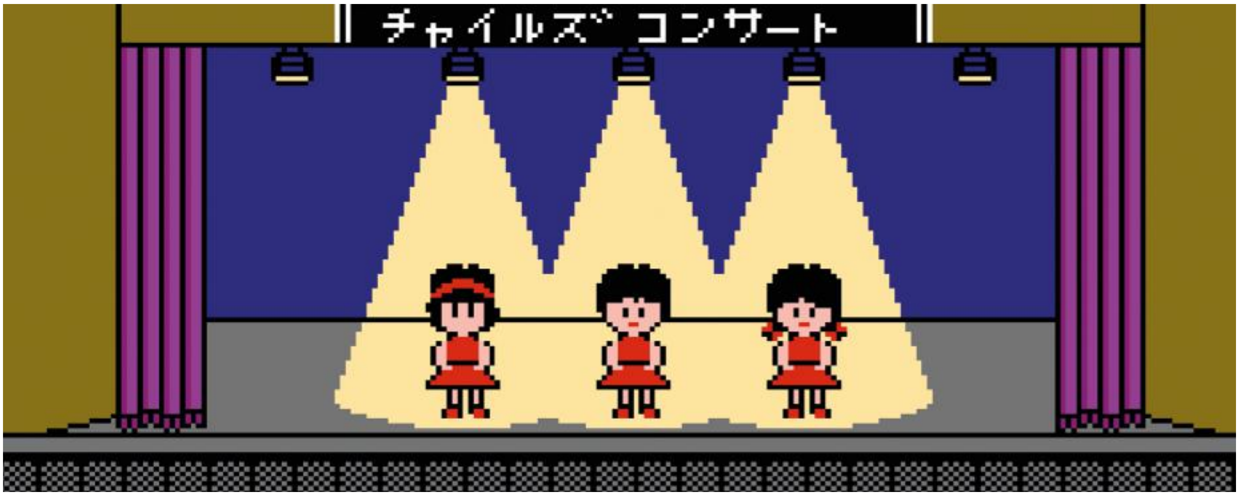
ダルス「ひくうていか‥」

It was developed by some of the same key staff as made the NES *Ninja Gaiden* games, particularly director Hideo Yoshizawa, who later went on to Namco to helm the *Klonoa* series. The soundtrack should seem familiar to fans of Tecmo games too, as the fight theme sounds like it could fit into either *Ninja Gaiden* or *Tecmo Bowl*. Like these other Tecmo NES games, there are full screen animated cutscenes, which pop up at key points. Each of the seven main characters (many hop in and out of your party as the game progresses) has a unique skill, plus there's a party talk option that lets you discuss things with them. Characterisation is pretty limited compared to that in later games, but as with the combat, it's remarkably forward-thinking for its time, and some plot twists at the end keep the story fresh too.

Altogether, the action-based combat of *Radia Senki* sidesteps most of the tedious grind that 8-bit RPGs are known for, and its presentation helps make it approachable even to more modern players, something of a rarity. It was scheduled to be released in English as *Tower of Radia*, but unfortunately this never made it to market.

ラディア戦記
TECMO

All you need to know about *Radia Senki* is that the NES *Ninja Gaiden* team made an RPG, and in turned out pretty darn well.



LaSalle Ishii no Childs Quest

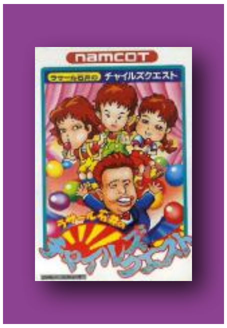
Developer: Namco | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): FC

LaSalle Ishii is a famous Japanese film and television personality, and here he lends his name to this unusual idol-raising JRPG from Namco. He runs a talent agency, which is in charge of a group called Childs, a trio of young women who have been around for a while but haven't really made it big. You are their manager, who must adventure around Japan, giving them everything they need to become big-time stars.

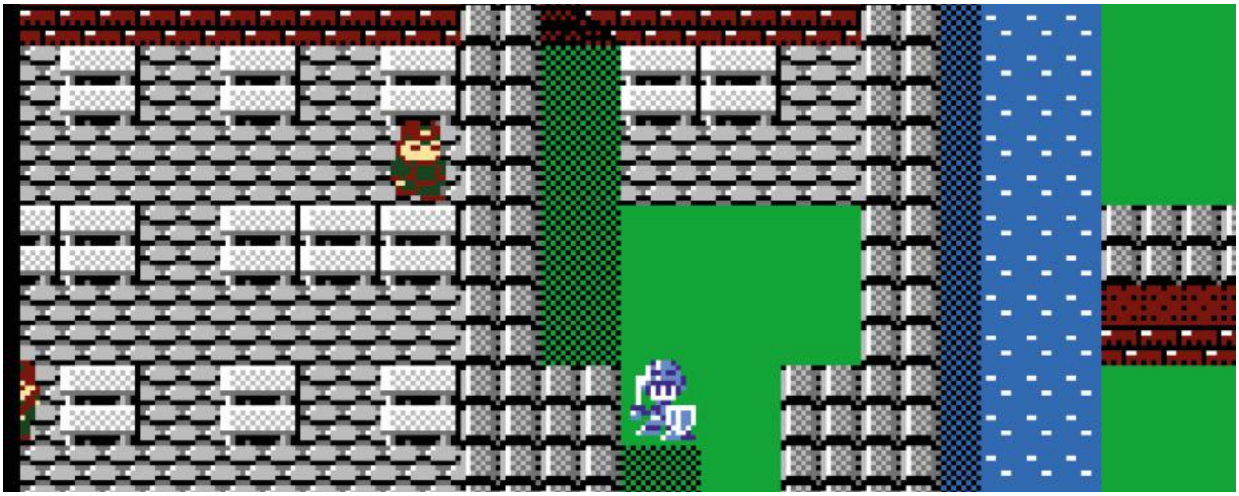
The game is basically a *Dragon Quest* parody that takes place in contemporary Japan, and it takes those familiar RPG mechanics and uses them in unusual ways. For example, there are random encounters, but rather than enemies, these are disgruntled music-lovers who can be converted into fans of your group. Some of them are random people, but you'll also come across dogs, piles of barf, smiling poop slimes (a parody of the famous *Dragon Quest* mascot) and other oddballs. You can choose to either compliment them, or bear the brunt of their insults. Unlike other RPGs, where enemies have HP gauges that go down as you attack, here they have Stress, which depletes when you either chat with them or just listen to them berate you. When their Stress hits zero, they leave and you win – in other words, you can just sit and let them yell until they get exhausted. You can also gain Manager Magic, which basically works the same way as magic in other games, plus money to purchase equipment and other necessary items. In each city, you also need to pay a fee to put on a concert. Here, you pick from a variety of songs and acts in hopes that the audience will find the show entertaining and thus increase the band's popularity.

The Childs trio tag along next to you but they don't participate in combat. Instead, they each have Dissatisfaction Points that increase if they get disgruntled. For example, in the beginning, they'll tolerate cheap accommodation, but as their career takes off, you need to spring for more expensive hotels. Additionally, you need to manage their bodily functions, because they can wet themselves, and they'll grow angrier and angrier until you either find a bathroom or buy them a diaper. If they hit the full 100% Dissatisfaction, they'll be tossed back to Ishii's talent office and chucked into the basement, from which you'll need to retrieve them.

Childs Quest is an ugly game even by early Famicom standards, but its original premise and wild sense of humour make it one of the standouts of the system's RPG library. Its modern setting and general goofiness make it a predecessor to Nintendo's *Mother,* released a few years later, and its theme of idol management is seen much later in Namco's *Idolmaster* series, though in practice the games are very different. An English fan translation was released by Woolsey Fan Company in 2019, renaming it *Stardom Warriors*. It recreates the game as if it had been localised for the NES back in the late 80s, adapting the Japanese setting and cultural jokes, and removing stuff that would've contravened Nintendo of America's guidelines.

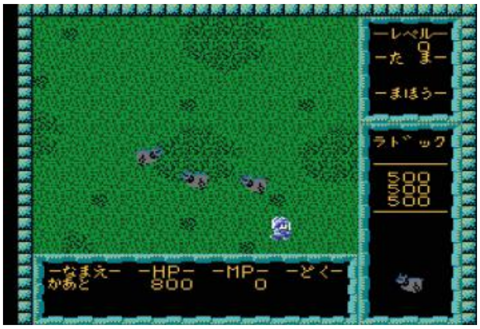


***Childs Quest* was one of the early RPG parodies to hit the Famicom.**



Minelvaton / Silva Saga (series)

Developer: Random House | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): FC, SFC



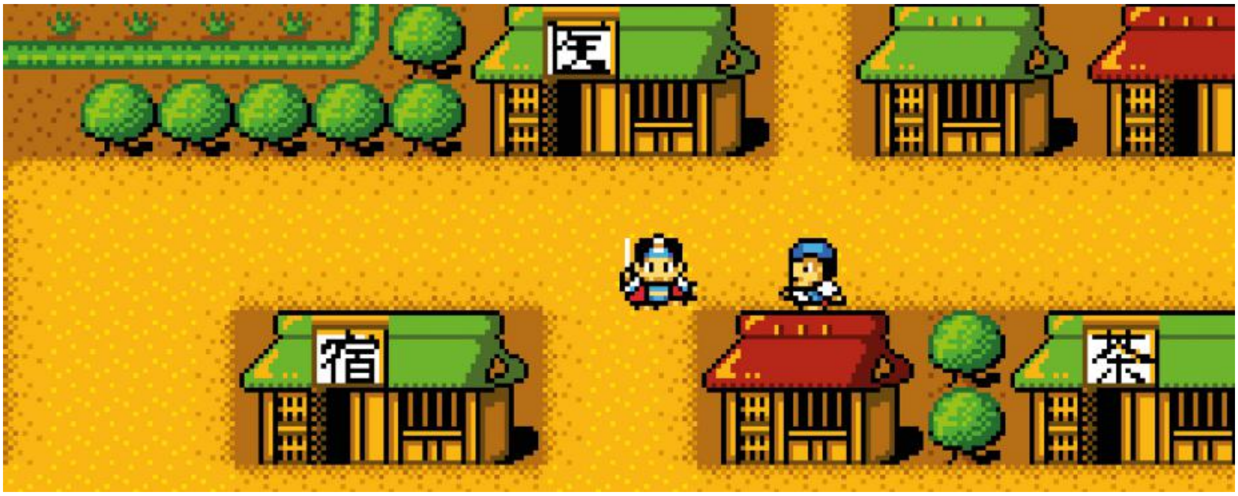
MINELVATON SAGA
2MBB
TAITO

Minelvaton Saga: Ragon no Fukkatsu ("The Resurrection of Ragon") seems like a straightforward *Dragon Quest* clone, at least at the outset. You control an unnamed hero, prince of a kingdom destroyed by the dark god Ragon. When he comes of age, he ventures forth to fight back and retake his kingdom. The key difference in this game lies in its battle system – when encounters take place, the game switches to an overhead action view, and you attack enemies by either ramming into them or shooting magic spells. Though the player only controls the hero directly, he is joined by two types of fighter, who are controlled by the CPU. One type is companions, who are important characters in the story, joining and leaving as the narrative progresses. They cannot level up, and any experience they might obtain goes to the hero. The other type is mercenaries, who can be drafted at the player's whim. These are generic characters who do gain experience, but if they fall in battle, they die permanently, unlike the companions. As a result, there's a bit of flexibility as to how you can approach combat. The game is also one of the first to have a battery backup save feature, predating *Dragon Quest III* by a number of months.

The sequel was released in 1992 for the Famicom, and was renamed *Silva Saga*, probably due to the fact that it was published by Seta rather than Taito. The game stars the same hero, now given the canon name Leon. The battle system has changed to a more traditional *Dragon Quest* type, though it adapts the mercenary system in interesting ways. You have a main party consisting of the primary story characters, but you can develop two other parties, one consisting of mercenaries, who are strong in physical combat, and the other of idol statues, who are skilled in magic. When fighting, you can choose which of the three parties engages the enemies, though the mercenary and idol factions fight automatically. Being a late release for the system, it's also free of some of the crustier elements of earlier 8-bit RPGs – the difficulty balance is solid, the pacing is fast, and the music is quite good. A sequel, *Silva Saga II*, was released for the Super Famicom the following year. This stars a new protagonist, an amnesiac, who must seek out the hero from the first two games. As such, it is a direct continuation and features many of the same areas.

The *Minelvaton Saga* series is the work of fantasy author Yuuto Ramon. Many of his works, including the earlier adventure game *Dark Castle* and the PC RPG *Riglas*, are connected and take place in the same world. The cover artwork for these games was provided by artist Hitoshi Yoneda, also known as the illustrator for the Japanese *Phantasy Star* Mega Drive games. The original Famicom game was programmed by Kazurou Morita, an early star programmer on the Japanese PC scene, who was also an expert shogi player, and founded the company Random House, which created a number of games for Enix.

This series had to change titles partway through, likely due to a change of publisher and is also loosely connected to three other games.

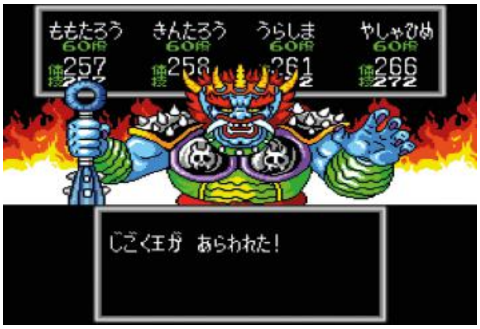


Momotarou Densetsu (series)

Developer: Hudson | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): FC, SFC, GB, GBC, GBA, PS1, X68, PCE

Hudson was one of the most successful publishers during the Famicom era, thanks to the popularity of their shoot-'em-ups, like *Star Soldier*. *Momotarou Densetsu* ("The Legend of Momotarou") was one of their early RPG efforts, which also became quite popular. It stars a number of characters from Japanese folklore, including Momotarou, the boy who hatched from a peach, as the protagonist. The game was directed by Akira Sakuma, along with comical art by Takayuki Doi.

There are plenty of aspects that distinguish it from *Dragon Quest*, even though it plays almost identically. Stats are indicated by kanji characters instead of English text ("dan" for experience level, and the characters for "heart", "skill" and "body" for exp points, MP and HP), and there's almost no concept of death – enemies just leave you alone once you've beaten them enough, and even the heroes are just knocked out when their HP is exhausted. Momotarou is the lone combatant in the first game, but is joined by friends from the original folktale to provide aid in combat, like the Dog, Monkey, and Pheasant. Special skills are gained by visiting hermits, for whom you must complete tasks before they'll grant you their wisdom. The Famicom game keeps track of elapsed time by indicating Momotarou's age, which increases by one for every two real-world hours. (This doesn't have any effect on his stats, though.) The sense of humour is also pretty wild. There are comical representations of Japanese mythological characters, like Kintarou, Urashima Tarou, and Princess Kaguya, as well as Princess Yaksha, the daughter of the family that rules the underworld. There are many real-world celebrity parodies too, including some appearances by the developers. Plus, there are also events where you can sneak into women's baths, as well as a special farting technique.



じごく王が あらわれた!

The first game hit the Famicom in 1987 and was also ported to the Sharp X68000, and the PC Engine got an enhanced port in 1990, called *Monotaro Densetsu Turbo*. A proper sequel was released later that year, also for the PC Engine, which allows the companions to become playable characters in combat instead of just providing support. *Momotarou Legend Gaiden* is a spinoff on the Game Boy, PC Engine and Famicom, which focuses on three side characters from the main games, while *Shin Momotarou Densetsu* for the Super Famicom is a sequel to the FC game (not the PCE remake), with a darker tone. There's also a remake of the first game for the PlayStation, which adds in some elements from its sequels (like multiple party members), plus a compilation of *Turbo* and *II* for the Game Boy Color.

There are also numerous spinoffs, including *Momotarou Festival* for the Game Boy Advance and PlayStation, which include competitive mini-games, and *Momotarou Katsugeki,* a side-scrolling platformer for the PC Engine. More popular is *Momotarou Dentetsu* ("Momotarou Steam Engine"), a digital board game series, which has nearly two dozen entries as of 2020.

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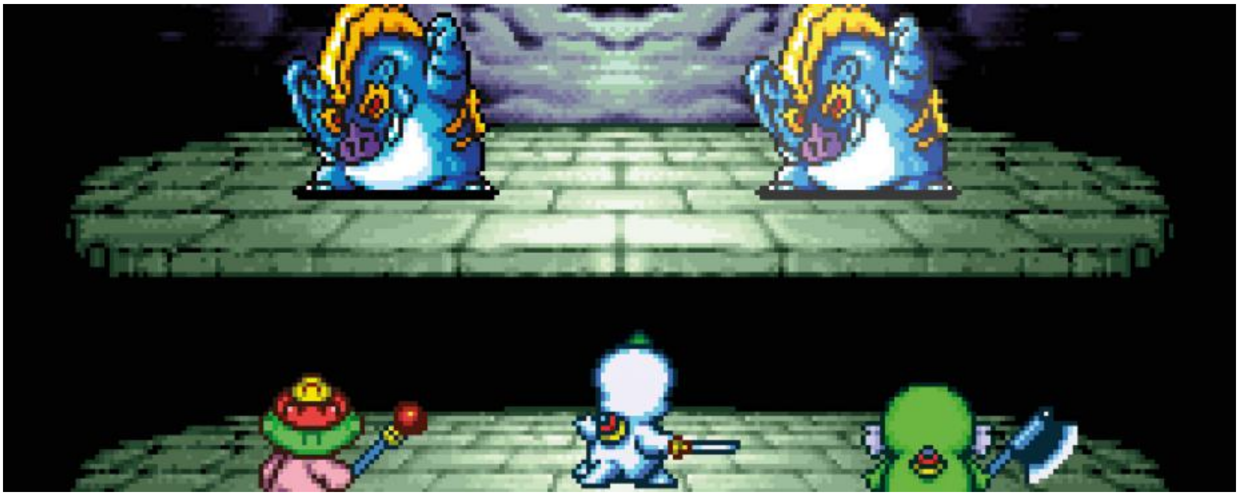
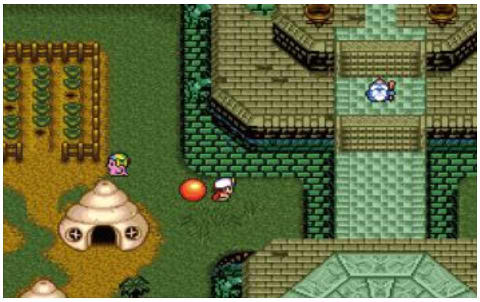
桃太郎伝説II

The lineage of the *Momotarou* series is confusing, with two parallel sequels, plus plenty of spinoffs and assorted compilations and remakes.



Kaijuu Monogatari (series)

Developer: Birthday | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): FC, SFC



The Super Famicom *Daikaijuu Monogatari* games, pictured here, feature a variety of cutesy Shellsaur companions.

English speakers are probably familiar with the Japanese word "kaijuu" when referring to gigantic movie monsters like Godzilla or Mothra. In *Kaijuu Monogatari*, it's spelled a little differently, referring to an original type of monster called a Shellsaur. Initially released for the Famicom, this game takes place in the world of Shell Dorado, and stars four characters – the Fire Shell human boy (default name: Ricky) and three other Shellsaurs, named Kupikupi, Poyon, and Babu, each possessing one of the remaining elements, as they fight the demon Fat Badger. The game package includes figurines of the four characters, a paper world map, and a sealed letter labelled "The Secret Letter of Tears" (actually a final dungeon map).

As in *Dragon Quest IV*, the heroes are scattered across the land and must find each other before going on a grand adventure together. However, you can switch viewpoints to any of the characters at any time, controlling them separately until you can all assemble. You can split up any time after, though it's to your advantage to stay together, since you can use union attacks across multiple characters. The battle system is similar to that in other *Dragon Quest* games, though your own characters are visible on the screen, and enemy sprites change to a weakened state when they take enough damage. When characters use the Defend command, they hide in the shells, and deflect nearly all damage. There are, however, special battle events called Devil's Traps, in which you face off against enemies on an 8 × 8 grid.

Birthday followed up this game with another RPG called *Juvei Quest*, which takes place in feudal Japan. It's not technically related, but it does introduce a battle system that was used in the Super Famicom sequel *Daikaijuu Monogatari*. There are three types of character who join your adventure – A-class are regular party members, B-class provide support skills for use on the field, and C-class are fixed NPCs that hop in and out of your team to create items. Between all of these, there's a fairly large cast, formed from a variety of races including cactus people, orcs, merpeople, and other anthropomorphs, as the story is much more advanced than that of the previous game. There's also a feature whereby you can build your own town. The game is mostly known among Japanese fans for its creepy Bio-Base dungeon, an organic cavern where living creatures are captured in cocoons and drained of their nutrients. A sequel, *Daikaijuu Monogatari II*, improves the visuals further, and uses the same PLGS system as Hudson's *Tengai Makyou Zero* (see page 240). Both *Kaijuu* games are pretty decent, with excellent visuals, solid stories, and cute, interesting characters.

These are the main games of the series, but it continued with assorted spinoffs, including two entries for the Game Boy, subtitled *Miracle of the Zone*, as well as *V Master Cloth* for the Game Boy Advance, all based on card games, and two *Poyon Dungeon Room* games, starring the Shellsaur Poyon.

Samsara Naga (series)

Developer: Victor Entertainment | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): FC, SFC, GBA

Samsara Naga (also spelled *Sansara Naga*) begins with your hero, either a boy or a girl, stealing a treasured dragon egg from their village in hopes of becoming a Dragon Master. Except, oops, it's actually an ostrich egg, which hatches, and the chick runs away. While chasing it, you come across an old man who tasks you to hunt down some dragon dung from the nearby mountain. Succeed, and he'll give you a real dragon egg. After it hatches, it will follow you around as you explore the land.

The title is Sanskrit, meaning "Resurrected Dragon". This is a rarity, a game based on the ancient Indus civilisation, with elements of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Brahmanism, in which the entire world lies on the back of a turtle. The game has quite a few celebrity names behind it, too. It was helmed by famed movie director Mamoru Oshii (of the *Ghost in the Shell* anime movie), and written by his collaborator Kazunori Itou, with music by film/anime composer Kenji Kawai. The comical character designs are by Tamakichi Sakura, and the game makes a good opportunity to show off his unique characters, whether enemies or goofy NPC portraits. The game has a silly sense of humour too, as noted by the soba noodle food chain that you can visit for guidance. At the centre of the story is a female Dragon Master named Amrita, whom you'll encounter several times through the story.

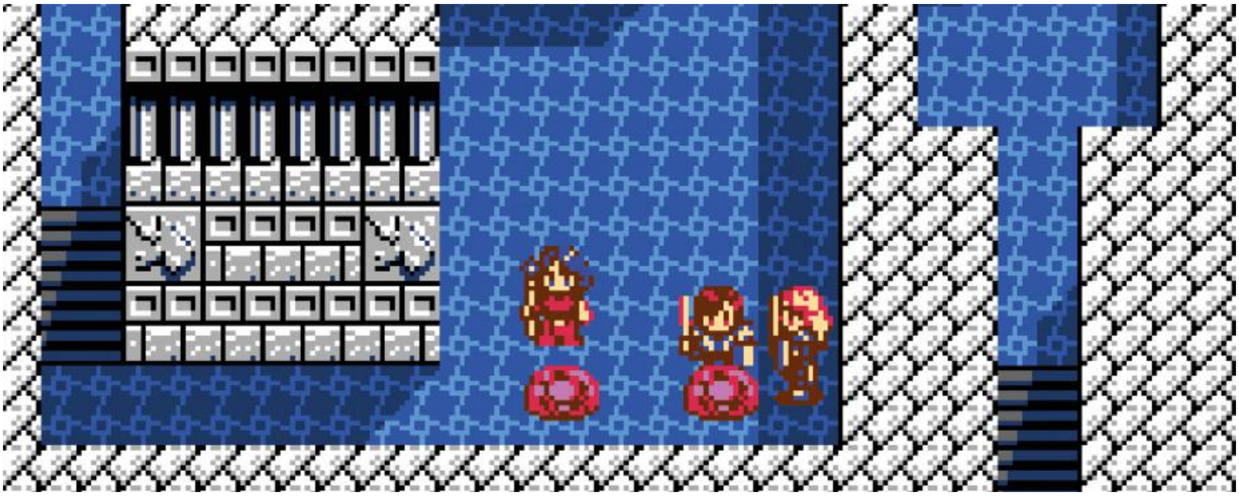
The main goal is, of course, to raise your dragon, which is mostly done by feeding it defeated enemies. However, you have to be a good parent too – you can, technically, attack any NPC on the battlefield, but you're setting a bad example for your dragon child, so he may become defiant and ignore your commands. You can also sell defeated foes in towns to obtain money. Strengthening your dragon is important, since your human character doesn't gain experience, and primarily strengthens by equipping new weapons or armour. Your dragon also gets stronger by eating particular types of prey, and can grow to immense sizes. While most RPGs spawn enemies based on how far through the story you are, this game will pit you against foes related to the type of terrain you're traversing. You have to be very careful where you step, otherwise you could end up fighting something you're vastly unprepared for. This is because the structure is fairly open-ended, even from the beginning.

A sequel was released for the Super Famicom, which plays similarly but has a different setup. This time, the world consists of eight lands stacked around a pillar. There are now different types of dragon, plus they can use magic spells, called Mantras. Interestingly, when you beat the game, the first save game slot is erased – this isn't a bug but rather an emphasis on the finality of completing the game, as in the later *Nier* games. Both games were ported to the Game Boy Advance, though they're more like remakes, since they make substantial updates to the visuals. In both original games, the battle screen is pretty stark; in this version it changes to an isometric perspective.

ナマズ使いのナマズンズンです！

スーパーファミコン
サンサーラ・ナーガ 2
Victor

Become a dragon trainer by setting good example for your dragon child.



Dark Lord (series)

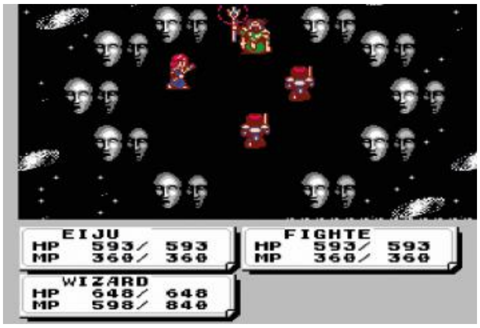
Developer: Data East | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): FC, SFC

Data East had a few RPG series, but while *Metal Max* and *Heracles no Eikou* borrowed many conventions from other JRPGs, its *Dark Lord* trilogy (not to be confused with Enix's *Dark Half* or Climax's *Dark Savior*) was quite a bit different, taking inspiration from tabletop RPGs. In practice, the game plays out a little bit like Falcom's *Sorcerian* – you create a handful of characters, and they begin their life in a medieval village. At various points in the game, there are scenarios that pop up, which are quests that you can venture out on and complete. However, adventuring isn't your character's day job, and instead they spend most of their time working. You can pick their profession, determining not only their skills, which can be used in the scenarios, but also the amount of income they receive. The scenarios you complete will govern which of the multiple endings you reach. Depending on the game, certain premade characters may join your party, if you can make friends with them, plus there are systems for learning various types of magic spell.

When you do undertake a scenario, your heroes venture off through assorted forests, caves, and dungeons. Whenever you encounter enemies, it switches to a turn-based system like a strategy RPG's, in which your character can move a limited number of squares per turn. Battles also take place on the field rather than on a separate screen. It's similar to the battle system found in the later Square SFC RPG *Treasure Hunter G*.

There are three games in the series, though they all have different names. *Dark Lord* was released on the Famicom in 1991. Compared to the squat characters typical of other 8-bit RPGs, the taller sprites make it stand out against its brethren. Its sequel was granted the somewhat goofy name *Wizap!: Ankoku no Ou* ("The King of Darkness") in 1994. It's fairly similar, though it allows for both turn-based and real-time battles – in the latter case, the player commands one character and the others are managed by AI. The difficulty level is also fairly high, since if you don't undertake certain scenarios within the time limit, the world will be destroyed and the game will end. This was followed by a third game, *Dark Law: Meaning of Death*, released in 1997. It's also similar but not quite as difficult, and the action part of the battle system has been removed, leaving just the tactical parts. In addition to the usual scenarios, there's also a sealed cave that you can venture into at any time, and beating it is required in order to see the best ending.

The stories are all mostly similar, being dark fantasy tales that involve dark gods, forgotten magic, and the like. They're very atypical for RPGs of the time, and weren't particularly popular, especially due to the high difficulty level and lack of any official strategy guides. But they've also become cult classics among the Japanese role-playing fan audience, and they're highly sought-after in the secondary market.



DECO
Dark Lord

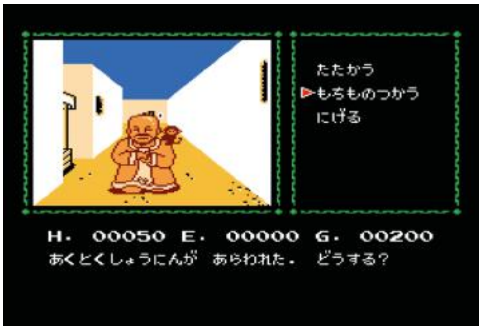
The *Dark Lord* games are among the handful of attempts at simulating the tabletop RPG experience in video game format.

Cleopatra no Mahou

Developer: Square | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): FDS

Cleopatra no Mahou ("The Magic Treasure of Cleopatra") is an adventure RPG hybrid from Square. You control a young man named Daisuke Kusano, the son of a famous archaeologist who has disappeared while exploring Egyptian ruins. The only way to rescue him is by finding the Tears of Isis, which can resurrect the spirit of Queen Cleopatra and save Daisuke's father.

Some of the areas, including the town, are presented as relatively simple mazes. Much of the game is like a standard first-person command-based adventure game, but every time you choose a command, there's a random chance that you'll be attacked by an enemy. These battle scenes are turn-based and greatly simplified – there's nothing you can really do but attack, and the outcome is determined largely by your experience level and equipped weapon. While some items can be found during your exploits in the ruins, many others need to be purchased from the town. This requires money, which is obtained by killing enemies. In other words, the RPG elements don't really add anything to the game other than tedious grinding. Take away all of the combat, and it's a pretty short game.


たたかう
▶もちものつかう
にげる
H. 00050 E. 00000 G. 00200
あくとくしょうにんが あらわれた. どうする?

There's not really much to *Cleopatra no Mahou,* but as a standard adventure, it's not too bad, and the Egyptian setting is pretty cool. The enemies are fairly large and actually animated – the monkey on the shoulder of the bandit is surprisingly cute. The constant loading, as with many FDS games, really drags the pacing though. Like most early Square titles, it's most interesting for the staff that went on to bigger things, including composer Nobuo Uematsu, director Hiromichi Tanaka, and artist Takashi Tokita.

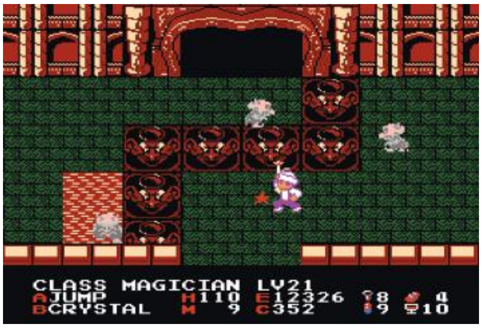
***Cleopatra no Mahou* is roughly similar to a Square FDS adventure game called *Suishou no Dragon,* though with added RPG elements.**

The Magic of Scheherazade

Developer: Culture Brain | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): NES

The Magic of Scheherazade takes place in the magical world of the Arabian Nights. A hero attempts to take down the evil Sabaron, but ends up banished to the past with his memory erased. Only by transcending time can the hero return to the present and rescue his girlfriend Scheherazade.

Developed by Culture Brain, mostly known for the *Super Chinese* and *Hiryu no Ken* titles, there's a lot going on this in game. At the outset, you can choose from three different classes – Fighter, Magician, and Saint – though you can switch at mosques found in towns. Each of the five chapters has its own overworld, plus two time periods that you switch between via hidden Time Doors. Most of the time, the chapters are in action RPG format, except when you switch screens, when there's a random chance you'll enter a turn-based battle. Here, you can pick from a variety of partners to help the hero take down your enemies. The fantasy Arabian setting is already unusual for an 8-bit game, but the characters, especially the partners, are often quite silly – you're joined by a cat sorceress called Coronya at the beginning, but other folks include Frauk the genie, a flying squirrel named Supica, and a translation robot named Gun Meca.

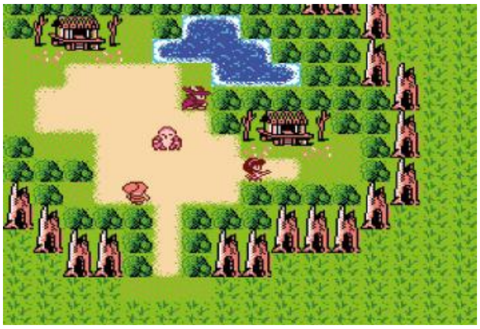


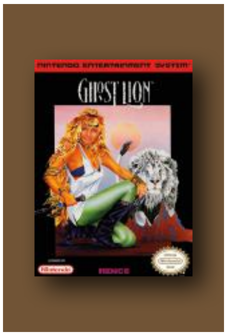
It's an extremely impressive game just for its scale, with a gigantic world and tons of characters, friend and foe. But it also tries to do a little too much – in particular, the turn-based battles probably could've been ditched because they don't do much but waste time. But, for a late '80s NES RPG, it's still a pretty cool game, especially considering that it was graced with a translation.

The US release of *The Magic of Scheherazade* didn't come out until early 1990, a few months after *Dragon Warrior* on the NES.

Legend of the Ghost Lion

Developer: Kemco | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): NES





The wildly inappropriate cover of the NES version of this game has been the subject of much hilarity over the years.

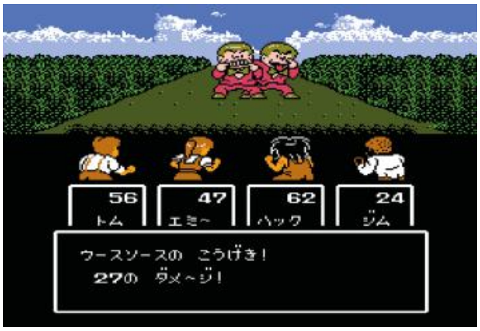
In Kemco's *Legend of the Ghost Lion*, you play as a young girl named Maria, whose village has been attacked by the beast referenced in the title. Her parents try to hunt it down and she follows, only to be knocked unconscious and wake up in a fantasy world.

While this is mostly a fairly standard *Dragon Quest* clone, there are a few interesting things about it. Female characters tended to get relegated to being side characters in RPGs of this era, and Maria, as the star, is one of the few exceptions. She's also the only human character, but various others can be summoned into battle by using specific items, and they will attack until their power runs out. The battles here are a little more visually dynamic, intercutting close-ups of the characters while they attack the enemy. Terms like experience level, HP, and MP are replaced with Hope, Courage, and Dreams. Maria also does not gain experience directly, but instead levels up (or gains Hope, rather) by finding treasure chests spread around the world.

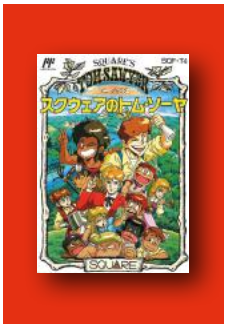
Among the game's other points of interest, it was one of the few of its type that was actually localised into English, complete with a goofy-as-heck cover that makes it look like an aerobics video. The game was also technically based on an English language movie called *Pyramid no Kanata ni: White Lion Densetsu* ("Beyond the Pyramids: Legend of the White Lion"). The movie was only released in Japan, and has little to do with the game other than sharing a protagonist (played by Anne Marie McEvoy, of the sitcom *Full House*) and focusing on a white lion.

Square's Tom Sawyer

Developer: Square | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): FC



ウースソースの こうげき！
27の ダメ～ジ！



***Tom Sawyer* is an odd choice to base a video game on, so the fact that it inspired not one but two separate games is kinda baffling.**

In between their *Final Fantasy* games, Square put out this odd little title, the second game for the Famicom to be based on Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* stories. (The other was an action game from Seta that was released in North America; this one wasn't.) It takes place in the year 1855 by the Mississippi River in Missouri, USA and stars characters like Tom, his buddy Huckleberry Finn, their slave Jim, and a few other characters, as they hunt for pirate treasure, though they end up in competition with one of the book's antagonists, Injun Joe. For Westerners, the game is mostly known for Jim's hugely racist character portrait.

It's fairly unique for an RPG in a number of ways – exploration is presented on the top half of the screen, from a side-on perspective, and battles are viewed from over the shoulder. There is no traditional overworld, just connected screens, and there's quite a bit of freedom to explore. During combat, enemies appear off in the distance, and your party members will run up to fight them. It's all quite comical, with weird enemies like zombies, and there are goofy portraits when you run away or get knocked out. The game is also infamous for a rare enemy attack so powerful that it will reset the entire console. There are no experience levels, but individual stats instead go up after battle; there is no currency and therefore no stores, so instead you find items while exploring. Each character has a unique ability, plus there are also super-attacks that the player can name.

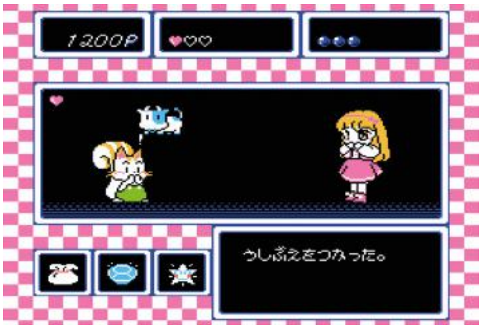
It's a very unusual, rather silly game, but while it's not really on the level of *Final Fantasy*, it still shows Square's skill in making 8-bit RPGs.

Nakayoshi to Issho

Developer: Yutaka | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): FC

Nakayoshi is one of Japan's longest running shoujo magazines, founded in 1954, and has published numerous manga aimed at adolescent girls. This Famicom game, the title of which translates as "Together with Nakayoshi", puts you into the shoes of a girl who visits worlds based on their many comics, meeting and interacting with their characters. Most of these will be unfamiliar to English speakers, since they were never translated – titles like *Goldfish Warning!*, *Pocket Park*, *MinMin!*, *Taiyou ni Smash*, and *Kurumi and the Seven Dwarfs* – but their most internationally popular one is *Sailor Moon*, which is indeed featured prominently here.

As an RPG, it's relatively simple, as it was aimed towards the same market as the manga, rather than the young male audience more typical for this type of game. Much of it is spent walking around, talking, collecting items, and solving simple puzzles. When you do enter combat, actions are decided entirely by the outputs of a slot machine. While there are no experience points, you do get money (called Peach points) and can purchase weapons and items, which are mostly cutesy stuff, or at least non-standard RPG stuff, like doughnuts and bananas.



The entire game is super-adorable, since it is a shoujo manga RPG. Dialogue is accompanied by large character portraits, and your main character is ridiculously cutesy, and so are the enemies – squirrels and the like. If nothing else, the game represents one of the handful of times that publishers tried to widen their audiences, and does so without being patronising – it's a fair stretch better than the average licensed game, for sure.

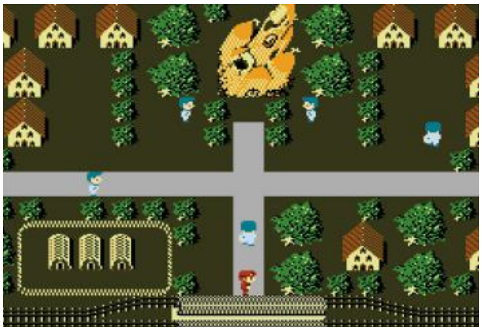
As the shoujo counterpart to *Famicom Jump*, this entry comes over as being quite a bit better, even if the properties aren't as recognisable to an international audience.

Tao: The Way

Developer: Pax Softnica | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): FC

Tao (subtitled "The Way") is easily the most bizarre RPG on the Famicom. It is very roughly based on The Great Prophecy of Nostradamus, in that a demon emerges in the year 1999, and the hero must stop him. Along the way, you'll ride dinosaurs, fight with equipment like machine guns, grenades, and chemical weapons, and face off against enemies like chickens and octopuses. You only control one character, and battles consist of little more than mashing the "A" button. Meetings with NPCs occur in close-up, and you can interact with them using various commands, as in an adventure game.

Its major theme is religion, as you'll meet townspeople of the Christian and Buddhist faiths, as well as assorted deities. It is not anti-religion though – in fact, it is very much pro-religion, focusing on Yiguandao, a Chinese faith that began in the '40s and is officially outlawed there today. The game suggests that this is the one true religion and all others provide false gods, a sentiment hammered home so fiercely that it feels like propaganda. Perhaps they were the ones bankrolling this game?

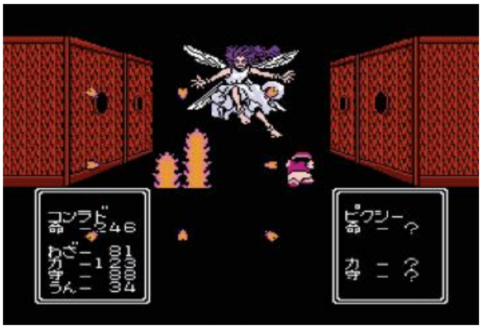


An off-the-wall Taoist sci-fi RPG should be an absolutely wild experience, but unfortunately it's really not much fun to play. The visuals are inconsistent, looking awful on some screens and decent in others, and the battle balance is pretty bad, not to mention the lack of strategy involved. What's shocking is that it was developed by Pax Softnica, the same company that also worked with Nintendo on numerous games, including *Mother*, and probably should've been able to create a better product.

False religions and dinosaurs should make for an interesting experience, though the game never remotely fulfils its potential.

Dream Master

Developer: Birthday | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): FC



コンラド
命 ー246
わざー 81
力 ー123
守 ー 88
うんー 34

ピクシー
命 ー ?
力 ー ?
守 ー ?

namcot
DREAMMASTER
ドリームマスター

***Dream Master* breaks away from the structure of typical RPGs, with a level-based approach.**

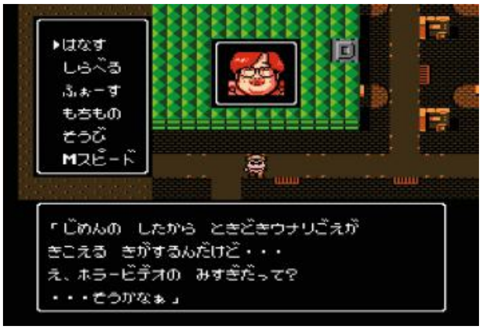
Dream Master (no relation to the *Little Nemo* games from Capcom) is an unusual RPG, published by Namco and developed by Birthday, the company behind the *Kaijuu Monogatari* series. As an apprentice dream master, who can enter into people's subconscious minds, you must enter the nightmarish Black Dream to save the princess of the kingdom.

There is no overworld to explore, as the game is divided into seven chapters, each with a dungeon to conquer. Most floors are covered with dark mist that cloaks the tiles in each room. You can clear them one by one by moving over them, though if you uncover a wall, you lose a health point; it's impossible to predict where some walls are, but, with time, you can get a feel for how the areas are laid out. You must hunt for items, which are used to solve simple puzzles on the dungeon maps but also in combat. You'll also wander into enemies, which are fought one-on-one (though occasionally you'll be joined by other characters, who will pitch in). There are three types of attack, each with different attack, defence, and hit ratios, and you also pick which part of the enemy to aim for; their weakpoints are revealed by using the Search command. Certain strong enemy attacks can also be dodged by hitting a direction, if you're quick enough. Though you can gain levels, foes don't respawn, so there's a cap on how strong you can get within a given chapter.

The visuals are typical 8-bit RPG stuff, though the monsters are large and very well detailed. Since the game lacks the grind of most other RPGs of the era, and it's not particularly long, it makes for an enjoyable experience.

Otaku no Seiza

Developer: Advance Communications | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): FC, PCECD



「じめんの　したから　ときどきウナリごえが
きこえる　きがするんだけど・・・
え、ホラービデオの　みすぎだって?
・・・そうかなぁ」

おたくの星座
AN ADVENTURE IN THE OTAKU GALAXY
FAMILY COMPUTER

***Otaku no Seiza* tried to get by on its rather crass man-hating gimmick and failed … twice!**

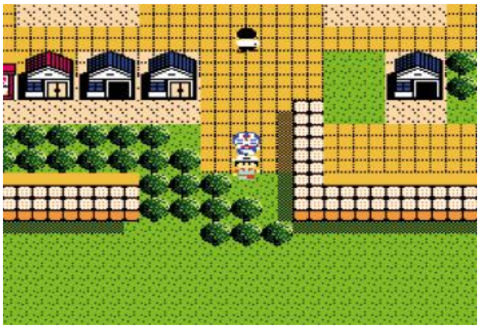
Otaku no Seiza, given the English subtitle *An Adventure in the Otaku Galaxy,* takes place in a distant future where women rule the planet and men are treated as an underclass, referred to as "otaku-chan" ("nerdlings"). Not only that, but the land is overrun by a variety of bizarre beasts. The amnesiac protagonist wakes up and decides to take down the Five Aurora Daughters, the leaders of this society, who live in floating cities around the land, and re-ignite civilisation's manhood. The story is by Hiroshi Motomiya (*Salaryman Kintaro*) with art by Hisashi Eguchi (*Stop!! Hibari-kun*).

The concept is quite misogyonistic, although it also doesn't take itself all that seriously. Most of the enemies are pretty strange, often being men in comical costumes (salarymen in sailor uniforms for example) or odd hybrids, like dogs with men's faces. For the most part, it's yet another typical *Dragon Quest*-style RPG, with many of the same issues in other games on the Famicom but exacerbated somewhat. The random encounter rate is high, the hit rate is low, and the general balance is poor. It's another game that uses an unusual setup to mask its subpar design.

The rights holders must've felt strongly about this concept and these characters though, because they were resurrected in 1993 for an actual idol group, an anime OVA, and a pachinko machine. Along with these came a pseudo-remake of the 8-bit game, now upgraded for the PC Engine CD, called *Aurora Quest: Otaku no Seiza in Another World,* which includes a revamped scenario, improved visuals and voice acting. However, the battle system is still a pain, and ultimately it's not much of an improvement.

Doraemon: Gigazombie no Gyakushuu

Developer: Epoch | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): FC



This game has some pretty good music too, with the underworld map theme being a favourite among retro game music fans.

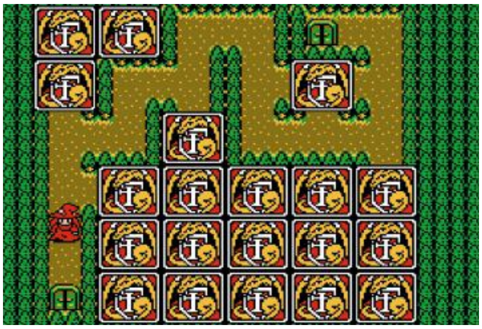
Doraemon, the time-travelling robot cat created by the team known as Fujiko Fujio, debuted in manga form in 1969. That ran for nearly 30 years, and eventually led to assorted TV shows, movies, and of course, video games. The second Famicom title, *Doraemon: Gigazombie no Gyakushuu* ("Gigazombie Strikes Back") is an RPG in the style of *Dragon Quest*, in which you hunt down the nefarious criminal Gigazombie. The protagonist is an original character representing the player, and is always in the party along with Doraemon; various other characters pop in and out of the party, including *Doraemon* regulars.

There are several worlds to visit, each based on one of the movies, with a story that's a sequel to it: you'll visit demons in the Makai, explore underwater, adventure underground to the land of dinosaurs, and travel to ancient Japan. Combat is in typical *Dragon Quest* format, except there is no magic – instead, each character can use one of Doraemon's trademark gadgets (which have been scattered about and must be collected), which drains a shared pool of Dorayaki (a type of Japanese pastry), which can later be replenished in towns, depending on how many enemies you kill. Extraneous items can also be stored in Doraemon's 4D pocket.

The balance is a little off – boss battles in particular are rough – but otherwise it's a pretty decent game, especially for a licensed title. It has some nice touches too, like the character portraits in dialogue. Plus there's a fun gag right at the beginning, where you can repeatedly say "no" when Doraemon asks if you'd like to join his journey, ending the game almost immediately.

Monster Maker (series)

Developer: Sofel | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): GB, FC, SFC, PC98, PCECD



Beginning on the Game Boy, this relatively prolific series was basically killed by one dreadful 16-bit release.

Monster Maker originated as a card game in 1988, which was popular largely thanks to the cute fantasy artwork by illustrator Kugatsu Hime. It spawned a video game series, which was overseen by Kazunari Suzuki, one of the members of the original *Megami Tensei* staff.

The first *Monster Maker* video game was released for the Game Boy. After picking from one of four heroes, and finding companions in town, you venture onto the world map and visit dungeons. These areas are completely hidden by cards, which need to be flipped over, revealing the terrain. In addition to items, you'll also find enemies, which are fought in the typical JRPG turn-based fashion. Most everything is represented by cards, owing to the source material. Characters do not level up; but rather the protagonist grows stronger by finishing quests given by the king. The only magic is in consumable cards, which can be purchased in the towns.

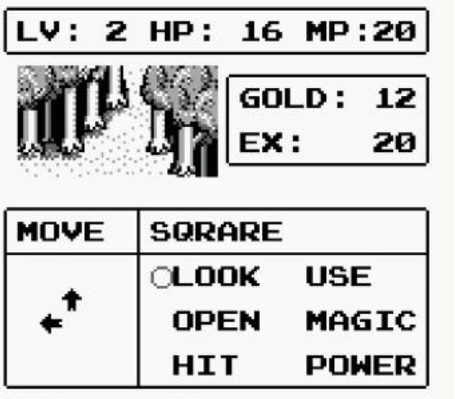
The series continued, with separate sequels on the Game Boy, Famicom, and Super Famicom, though they eventually stripped away the card gimmicks and other elements that made it so unique in the first place. The PC Engine game, subtitled *Dark Dragon*, was supposed to be the series' shining moment, but due to development difficulties, the story was cut in half, promising a sequel later. Unfortunately, the game that was released was such a buggy disaster that the promised follow-up was cancelled, and the game series effectively died, until a brief GBA resurrection down the line. A few other non-RPG games were released, including a digital board game for the Super Famicom called *Monster Maker Kids*.

The Sword of Hope

Developer: Kemco | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): GB

Kemco was known for making Japanese console versions of Western computer games, most famously for the ICOM MacVenture point-and-click games like *Shadowgate*, *Déjà Vu*, and *Uninvited*. For their *Sword of Hope* series, they took this formula and used it as the basis for an RPG. In the first game, you control Prince Theo, whose father has gone mad with power, and who must fight back against him to find the Sword of Hope and reclaim the throne. In the second, you play as Theo again, this time retrieving the stolen Sword of Hope and defeating the evil Zakdos.

The interface is very similar to that on the ICOM MacVentures, though made easier to use for the portable screen. While those games were known for illogical puzzles and constant, unpredictable death scenes, *Sword of Hope* replaces these with a turn-based combat system. When you navigate around, you'll see little dots on the map, which indicate enemy encounters. Fights are simple and largely revolve around grinding, although the random number generator can screw you over and kill you too quickly, but the punishment for death is light, just sending you back from the starting location. The second game is a little more in-depth, as it allows you to use three characters in combat instead of just Theo. Overall, they're a little simple, but they're unique genre hybrids and they work well on the Game Boy. There was also a Japanese-only spinoff title using the same system, called *Nekojara Monogatari*, which stars a boy who's been turned into a cat.



GAME BOY
SWORD OF HOPE

Known as *Selection* in Japan, both games were bundled together on the same cartridge and re-released in their native territory.

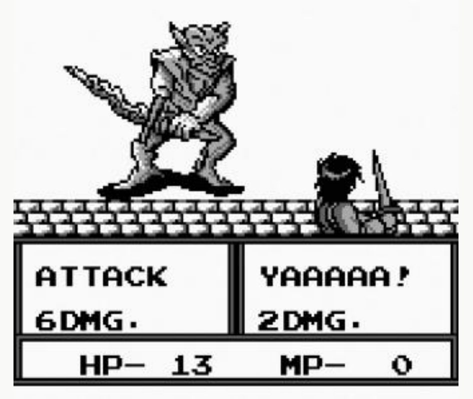
Great Greed

Developer: Namco | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): GB

In Namco's *Great Greed*, you control a boy from the regular world, sucked into the kingdom of Greene, and tasked with hunting down the villain Bio Hazard Harry, who seeks to pollute the planet. The environmental message was added to the English localisation, though the main gimmick in both languages is that many aspects are named after food. (The land is called the Vitamina Kingdom in the Japanese version.) There's a sorceress named Microwave, princesses named Gum Drop, Lollypop, Candy, Cup Cake, Citrus, and Truffle, and areas with names like Sushi and Spaghetti. In spite of the amusing names, the food theme doesn't really carry over to the visuals, and it generally looks like a standard *Dragon Quest* clone, though there are some unusual events, like a trek through a record factory.

Battles are one-on-one, though the view is from over the shoulder of the hero. There are no menus; commands are given with buttons – A attacks, B defends, Start runs, and spells are assigned to the D-pad. In each area, you're also accompanied by a princess, who can't be controlled directly, but each provides a unique benefit, like absorbing enemy attacks, increasing the hero's strength, or healing him.

At the ending, you're offered the hand in marriage of any of the princesses. However, you can actually choose to marry anyone, including anyone in the royal court, male or female, even breaking up the king and queen to wed one of them. It's an unusual send-off for a quirky little game.



GAME BOY
Great Greed
namco

Other than the amusing alliteration, the English title of this game doesn't really tell you much about it, as if it's hiding its unusual food-based theme.

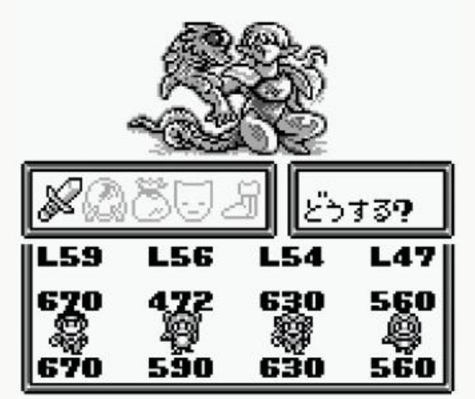
Xerd no Densetsu

Developer: Vic Tokai/Graphic Research | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): GB

On the surface, *Xerd no Densetsu* ("The Legend of Xerd") seems like a typical Game Boy JRPG, similar to *Final Fantasy Legend* or *Aretha.* But beneath this exterior lies one of the most absurd stories seen in the genre.

The Xerd of the game's title is a hero who defeated evil 800 years in the past. Jump to the present and you control a prince named Jake, tasked with hunting down the reincarnation of this legendary hero. Fairly early on, you're joined by a young woman named Mahna. When adventuring together, once you reach a certain town, the people suddenly proclaim that you should be married (due to a message from God, they say), and the couple goes along with it. In the next town, surprise, she's pregnant! She gives birth to a young boy, whom the priest names (gasp!) Xerd. As it turns out, their son is actually the reincarnation of the hero they've been looking for! When they dip him in a certain fountain, he suddenly becomes fully grown, so he joins along with his parents to complete their journey.

The casual way in which major events just sort of happen is insane. It's unclear whether it's intentional, or just the result of bad storytelling. Plus, the game's other claim to fame is the digitised screams that come out of the system when enemies are defeated, something so majestic that even the box brags about it. It's certainly enough to make it stand out from other Game Boy RPGs. It also received a sequel, though this lacks its bizarre scenario, so it never really made a mark.



どうする?

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GAME BOY
ザードの伝説
VIC TOKAI

Xerd no Densetsu was ostensibly created by human beings, but feels like something from a different planet.

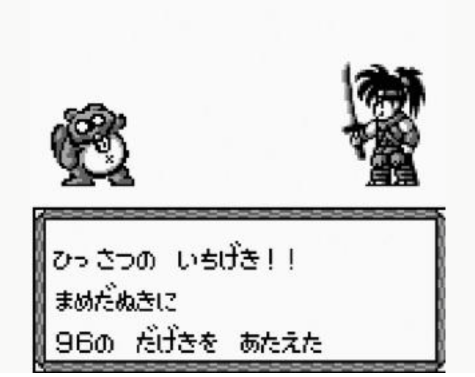
Oni (series)

Developer: WinkySoft/Pandora Box | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): GB, SFC, PS1, NDS

The *Oni* series was ridiculously prolific, with five games on the Game Boy, two on the Super Famicom, one on the PlayStation, and one on the Nintendo DS. They are standard JRPGs that take place in an island country that is very obviously based on Japan. You control the ninja Tenchimaru, whose hometown has been destroyed, and fight against various youkai (supernatural monsters or spirits). In battle, the main feature is that you can use a transformation ability, like Sentai superheroes. *Oni 3* takes place hundreds of years after the first two, and contains multiple chapters with various protagonists, à la *Dragon Quest IV*. However, *Oni 4* jumps back and continues the story of *Oni 2*. *Oni 5* transcends space-time by collecting all of the protagonists together.

The series jumped to the Super Famicom with *Onigami Kourinden*, which takes place in the Japanese historical Kamakura period, and *Bakumatsu Kourinden Oni*, which takes place in the Bakumatsu period, and is also set partly in the United States, featuring Western youkai. There was also a spinoff arcade fighting game known in English as *Metamoqester*.

On the PlayStation, publisher Pandora Box put out *Oni Zero*, which takes place in the Heian era. With a story by Takeo Iijima and character designs by Jun Kamiya, it's fairly decent title, but the story is unfinished and a sequel was never made. The series was brought back for the DS with *Oni Zero: Sengoku Ransei Hyakka Ryouran* by Compile Heart, though it's unrelated to the previous game's story, and the quality is quite poor.



ひっさつの いちげき!!

まめだぬきに

96の だげきを あたえた

ONI
GAME BOY

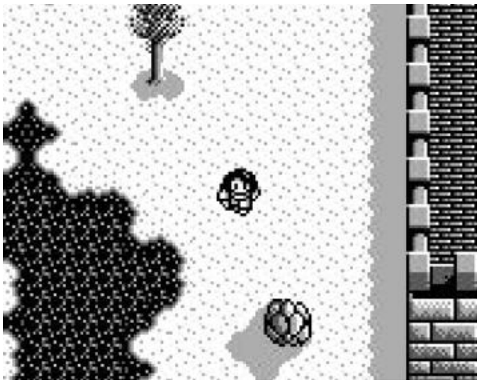
Takeo Iijima, the writer of the *Burai* RPG series, acted as both the producer and writer for many titles in the *Oni* series.

Aretha (series)

Developer: Japan Art Media | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): GB, SFC

Even though *Dragon Quest* was a cultural phenomenon for the Famicom, Enix seemed uninterested in creating any portable renditions, at least until the *Dragon Quest Monsters* spinoffs of the late '90s. That left it up to other companies to fill the market for portable RPGs, and one such series was *Aretha*. It was developed by a company called Japan Art Media, which later worked on some of the *Lunar* remakes, and published by Yanoman, which was primarily known for toys.

As for *Aretha*, the games are about what you'd expect from a *Dragon Quest* clone, except they star a female warrior named Materia, joined by a few other heroes in saving the land from the evil Howard. (This probably sounded a little more intimidating in Japanese.) There are a few minor gimmicks, like the ability to use a defeated monster from one battle in the next fight. The three Game Boy games form one complete trilogy.



DMG-A1J
GAME BOY
YANOMAN

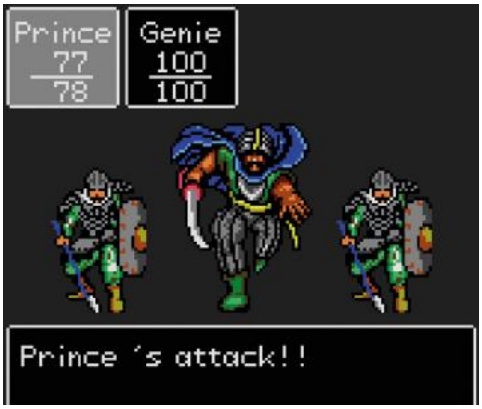
The series then leapt over to the Super Famicom, with its colour graphics, and shifting the story 100 years into the future, this time starring a young woman named Ariel. This is a two-part series showing her ascent to the throne, though it plays much the same as before. The second SFC game is the better of the two, offering breezier pacing (though shorter play time) and the removal of random battles. The third SFC game, *Rejoice: Aretha Oukoku no Kanata* ("Rejoice: Beyond the Aretha Kingdom") reformats the game as an action RPG. Altogether, the innovation in this series is rather limited, and the 16-bit games in particular feel dated compared to their contemporaries.

This prolific series is an example of how smaller companies kept chugging along in spite of competition from the larger publishers.

Defenders of Oasis

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): GG

The early JRPGs on the Game Gear weren't particularly good; they included the rather generic *Eternal Legend* and the terrible fanfic-style *Phantasy Star Gaiden*. But one of the better ones was *Defenders of Oasis*, which is also the only one of these to receive an English release. The game stars the Prince of Shanadar, who has been run out of his kingdom by the ancient wizard Ahriman, and returns for revenge. Accompanied by his genie, he meets up with two other folks, the ship captain Saleem (who was meant to be Sinbad in the Japanese version) and the troublesome thief Agmar, to fight back against Ahriman and take back his throne.



DEFENDERS OF OASIS
SEGA
GAME GEAR

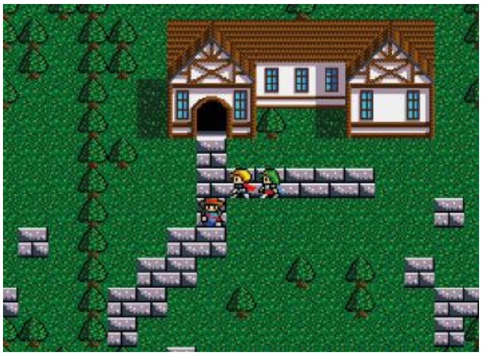
This is still a pretty typical *Dragon Quest*-type game, though the Arabian setting makes it a little more interesting. Each of the four characters has a unique special ability – the thief can hide for a turn, and the ship captain can dance to attack multiple enemies. The genie is unique in that he is the only one who can use magic, but he also cannot level up normally, by getting experience, so instead he uses items to increase his stats and reads inscriptions to learn new spells. The visuals are quite a bit better than that in most Famicom RPGs, though. A solid title altogether.

In Japan, the game is known as *Shadam Crusader*. Elsewhere, it was known as *Defenders of Oasis*, which later tied in with the American name of the Genesis action RPG *Beyond Oasis*. Other than sharing the Arabian setting, there's nothing that connects these games.

***Defenders of Oasis* uses an auto-save function, which was very innovative for its time, and super handy in a portable title.**

Phantasy Star Gaiden

Developer: SEGA/Japan Supply Systems | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): GG



PHANTASY STAR
GAME GEAR
SEGA

While the mainline *Phantasy Star* games were made for home consoles, the Game Gear received two spinoffs that were released only in Japan – *Phantasy Star Adventure*, a command-based adventure game, and *Phantasy Star Gaiden*, a proper RPG. In theory this should've turned out well – the first *Phantasy Star* was on the Master System, and the Game Gear hardware is almost identical – but instead it was outsourced to obscure developer Japan Supply Systems, who didn't remotely understand how to handle this beloved property.

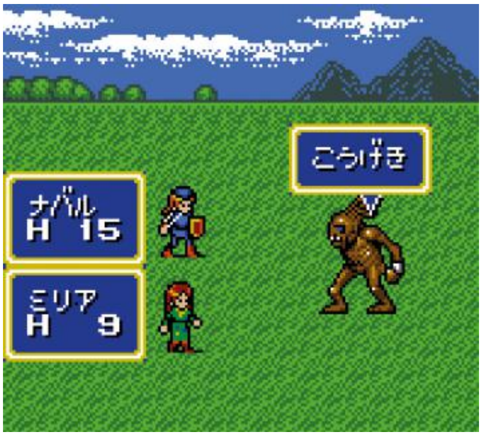
The story takes place on the planet Copto, on the Alisaland colony, which was named after Alisa (Alis in the English version), the heroine of the first *Phantasy Star*. According to legend, she fought the demon Cablon 400 years ago and sealed him away, but he has been awakening from his slumber. Two children, Alec and Mina, have to stop him. In the course of the game, a few other characters will take a turn occupying the third party slot, including Alisa, who has been in hypersleep for all the intervening centuries.

That tie-in is really the only *Phantasy Star* thing about this game. The series was defined by its cool anime sci-fi aesthetics, which are almost completely absent here, save for a few things, like an android that turns into a boat. Otherwise, it feels like grade school fan fiction. The SMS *Phantasy Star* had brilliantly animated enemies; *Phantasy Star Gaiden* has enemies in tiny windows, with the battle screens mostly taken up by menus. Everything about the game is extremely regressive, which is shocking, considering how pioneering the original game was.

This Game Gear game is even less of a *Phantasy Star* game than *Phantasy Star III*, which is really saying something.

Moldorian

Developer: Rit's | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): GG



MOLDORIAN
モルドリア
GAME GEAR
SEGA

The world of *Moldorian: Hikari to Yami no Shimai* (or "Moldorian: Sisters of Light and Darkness") is divided into two realms, one inhabited by humans, and the other by demons. They mostly exist peacefully, unaware of each other's existence. That is, until a human girl named Milia is kidnapped in a forest. It's up to her childhood friend, Navarre, to save her, while he learns about the history that created these two worlds to begin with.

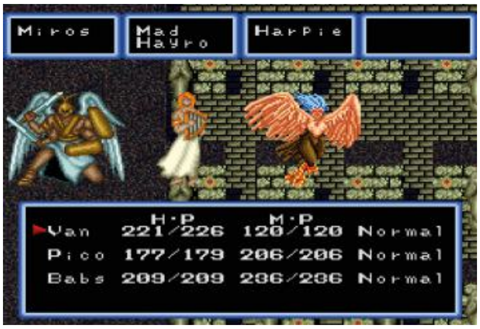
Moldorian features side-view fights that seem to channel the Active Time Battle System from the *Final Fantasy* games, but work a little bit differently. *Moldorian* ditches the usual command menu – time flows automatically, and when a character's turn comes around, they step forward. Then, you can hold down a direction to attack a foe, cast one of four equipped magic spells, or take another available action. If you don't act quickly enough, you'll lose that turn. It's quite breezy, which is handy, since the random encounter rate is fairly high.

There are some recognisable names behind the game, with character artwork by Hiroshi Kajiyama, who provided illustrations for the later *Shining Force* games, as well as the *Golden Sun* titles. The soundtrack is by Hitoshi Sakimoto, later known for *Ogre Battle* and *Final Fantasy Tactics*. Since this was a late release for the system, it has a remarkably modern feel, something like a 16-bit RPG with 8-bit sound and visuals. It's not incredibly remarkable, but it is one of the better portable RPGs of the time.

While most 8-bit games have a distinct *Dragon Quest* flavour, *Moldorian* feels more modern than its compatriots.

Cosmic Fantasy (series)

Developer: Telenet | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): TG16, MCD



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      H·P      M·P
▶Van  221/226  120/120 Normal
 Pico 177/179  206/206 Normal
 Babs 209/209  286/286 Normal
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Created by manga artist Kazuhiro Ochi, *Cosmic Fantasy* is a lighthearted romp across an undeveloped planet by an "Adventure Boy". As in *Star Ocean*, the sci-fi elements are largely bookends to a medieval fantasy. Our heroes mainly wander through forests fighting slimes and kobolds via an astoundingly clunky turn-based battle system.

The first game concerns Cosmic Hunter Yuu crash-landing on Planet Norg along with his otter/motorcycle companion Monmo (don't ask), before picking up the mystical heroine Saya and saving the planet from the evil Morgan. In the end, Yuu heads back into space to assist the sequel's heroes, usually alongside the greedy and lecherous cat Nyan. There's a fair share of cheesecake; every heroine gets at least one shower scene.

The series is probably best known to Westerners for Working Designs' localisation of *Cosmic Fantasy 2*. Hunter Van's beloved Laura is discovered to be a magical princess in exile, hiding from the villainous Galam. Laura's powers can only be unleashed if a man takes her in marriage – naturally Galam wants these powers for evil, but Van is posited as truly worthy. Plot aside, it's a terribly unremarkable game, with endless random encounters. Worse still, experience is hard to come by, so grinding becomes a necessity. The halfway mark sees Galam throw Van decades into the future and the focus shifts to Cosmic Hunter Lim (localised as Cadet Babbette), armed with just a butter knife. It's agonising, but being an early CD-ROM JRPG, it enjoyed positive press. The cutscenes are nice, to be fair. The first two games were collected as *Cosmic Fantasy Stories* for the Mega CD.

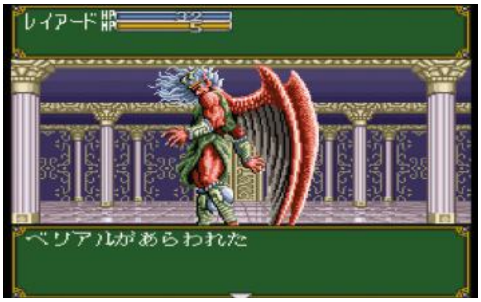
Cosmic Fantasy 3 focuses on Rei, a young healer. On his way to the city he runs into Nyan, who crash-landed on the planet after being attacked by yakuza cats. Soon, they join Yuu and Van to take on the wicked Garudo. It's more of the same, though the overworld has been eschewed in favour of a contiguous environment. The enemies are more comical than the previous games stock D&D monsters, but combat is as mindless as ever.

Cosmic Fantasy 4 was something of a last hurrah. It was split into two games, with the sci-fi elements finally front and centre, and the graphics at their best, resulting in hefty load times. Combat has had an overhaul, borrowing *Final Fantasy*'s ATB system. *Totsunyuu-hen* returns us to Yuu and Saya as they attempt to rescue a princess and end up in a battle against the fabric of the universe. *Gekitou-hen*, released a few months later, focuses on Van as he faces down his past. *Cosmic Fantasy 4* is definitely the series at its best; a bittersweet thought for a final chapter. The series also received an OVA in 1994, titled *Cosmic Fantasy: Lure of the Cosmic Cougar!*, in which the busty space pirate Velga commits crimes to draw Yuu out in an attempt to seduce him. Breasts get groped, faces get slapped, and spaceships explode. It's what you'd expect of an OVA of this vintage.

Spread across five releases, *Cosmic Fantasy* is pretty average as a game, but does feel very much like an anime OVA in video game format.

Tenshi no Uta (series)

Developer: Riot/Telenet | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): PCE, SFC



ベリアルがあらわれた

Tenshi no Uta ("Angel's Hymn") is a mish-mash of Arthurian legend, Greek mythology, paganism, and Christianity, centred around the theme of love between a man and a pure maiden who turns out to be an angel. There's an idealism about this romance that, though heteronormative, has a genuine sweetness about it, not unlike those in *Lunar*. It's also nice that each central heroine is competent; even when she becomes damseled, it's never for long. Otherwise, the games are fairly standard – character customisation is minimal, battles are simplistic, and there's a day-night cycle.

Tenshi no Uta's appeal is not found in its gameplay, but in its presentation. Each narrative milestone is marked by a lush cutscene featuring art by Hiroshi Fuji (*Valkyrie no Bouken*) and later Nobuteru Yuūki (*Escaflowne*). The redbook soundtrack is one of the earlier works of Michiko Naruke (*Wild Arms*), while the final game boasts a score from Motoi Sakuraba. Notably, *Tenshi no Uta* was where *Wild Arms* creator Akifumi Kaneko got his start, initially as planning assistant, then as the sequel's director/writer.

Set in a fantastical take on the British Isles, all the entries take place within a single world; characters and concepts from the first game show up in its sequels. The first *Tenshi no Uta* sets the stage, as protagonist Kair prepares to wed his beloved, Claire. Before long she's abducted by the forces of Lucifer, leading Kair to assemble a party to rescue her. The story doesn't end with Claire's emancipation – being a descendent of divinity, she's the best equipped to banish Lucifer.

The sequel, *Datenshi no Sentaku* ("Choice of the Fallen Angel") is set 100 years after Lucifer's banishment. Friends Fate and Shion are patrolling their village, when they hear about a monster outbreak coming from a mysterious tower. Inside it, they find an imprisoned woman who can only remember her name: Rhianna. Notably, *Datenshi no Sentaku* adds complexity to the framework laid down by its predecessor: Rhianna turns out to be the titular Fallen Angel – sent by the archangel Raphael to bring about the next age, her choice is to destroy all life or embrace humanity. We also encounter a haggard Kair, cursed to wander undying until Lucifer is eradicated.

By 1993, RioT split off from Telenet to form Media.Vision, causing Telenet to develop the third game, *Shiroki Tsubasa no Inori* ("A Prayer of White Wings") with none of the original staff. Transitioning from the dying PCE to the Super Famicom, the finale lacked the trademark cutscenes and CD-quality audio, but still has its charms. Protagonist Rayard visits the circus and falls in love with the singer Callana. When Callana is kidnapped and forced to marry the wicked Lord Lanner, Rayard springs into action. Soon they're on the run as they search for clues to why Callana bears such a resemblance to a revered goddess.

This was one of Telenet's final games. Coupled with its hopeless romanticism, there's a pleasant wistfulness about *Tenshi no Uta* as a whole that's not easily replicated.

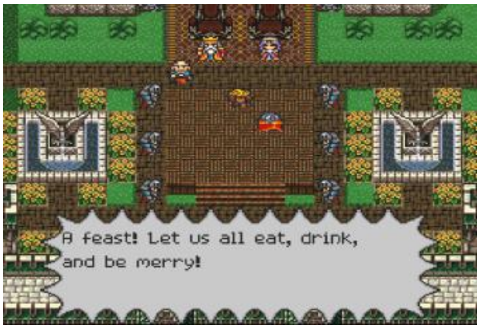
Tenshi no Uta **is the fantasy-flavoured counterpart to *Cosmic Fantasy*, though the games were left unlocalised.**

Live-A-Live

Developer: Square | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SFC

Square was pretty big on games featuring multiple protagonists available to the player, like *Romancing SaGa* and *Trials of Mana*. *Live-A-Live* was a little different from these, because each of the main featured characters exists in a different time period and stars in their own focused story. The game was a joint venture with Shogakukan, a publishing company that provided several illustrators, one for each chapter. The game was directed by Takashi Tokita, previously of *Final Fantasy IV*, and later of *Chrono Trigger*.

The chapters are based on assorted genre fiction: the Kung Fu chapter stars an aging martial artist who passes his technique down to three students; the Prehistoric chapter focuses on a caveman named Pogo who must save a woman from being a sacrificial treat for a T-rex; the Near Future chapter stars an orphan named Akira, who has psychic powers that let him read minds and give him control of a giant mecha; the Present Day chapter stars a wrestler named Masaru who simply wants to become champion; the Sci-Fi chapter stars a robot named Cube on a starship; the Old West chapter stars a wanderer named the Sundown Kid as he faces off against a gang; and the Bakumatsu chapter takes place in 19th century Japan, as you control the ninja Oboromaru as he infiltrates an enemy castle. Though these all seem wildly disparate, the main antagonists have similar-sounding names despite taking on different forms. While these main chapters can be played in any order, once you beat them all, you unlock another one, the Medieval chapter, starring a knight named Oersted, which reveals the origin of the villain of all of the stories. This very last chapter has all of the protagonists gathering together to fight that ultimate foe, Odio. Each chapter has different tasks and goals. Some are heavily story-focused, others aren't. There's no combat in the Sci-Fi chapter, outside of the final battle, while the Present Day chapter is almost nothing but battles. There are plenty of pop-culture homages, particularly to *2001*, *Alien*, and *Street Fighter II*.



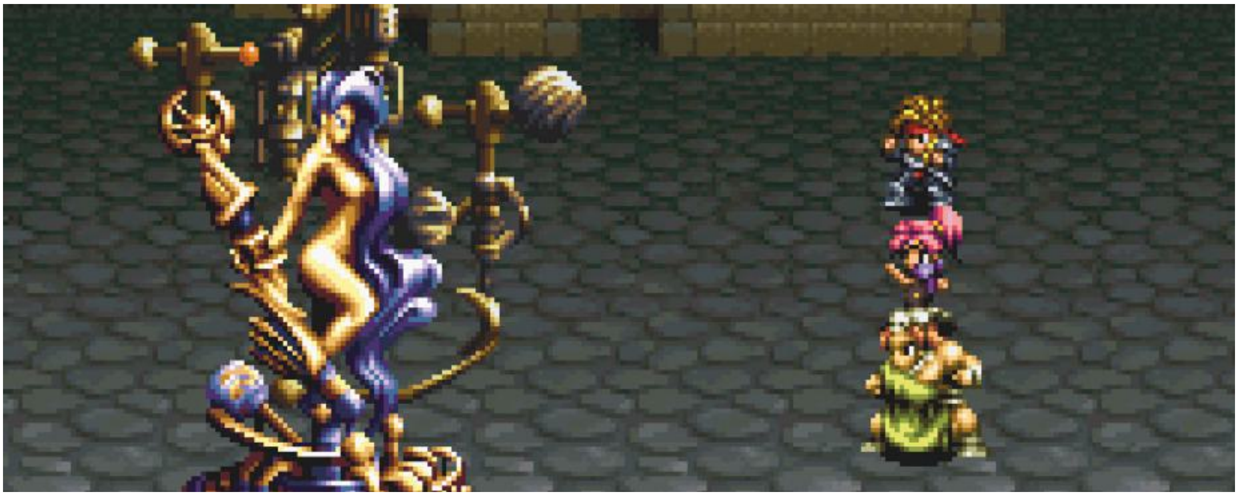
A feast! Let us all eat, drink, and be merry!

The combat features the Checker Battle system, which breaks the field down into a 7 × 7 grid. There are invisible action points that determine when characters can move around and attack. The various moves have different ranges, so positioning is key. There is no limit to how often you can use special moves, and you are automatically healed after battle. It's all a little vague and messy, but an interesting change from typical JRPG systems.

Live-A-Live tries to do a lot of things and doesn't entirely succeed at all of them, as some stories are far more engaging than others, and the chapters are so short that the characterisation is a bit shallow. But the fact that it contains so many wildly different genres – each with thematically appropriate exploration and battle themes, courtesy of Yoko Shimomura – that its strengths greatly overwhelm its faults.

LIVE A LIVE
ライブ・ア・ライブ
SQUARESOFT

***Live-A-Live* was met with a tepid reception even in Japan, where it was overshadowed by other, bigger-name Square titles, but it's become recognised as a cult classic over the years.**



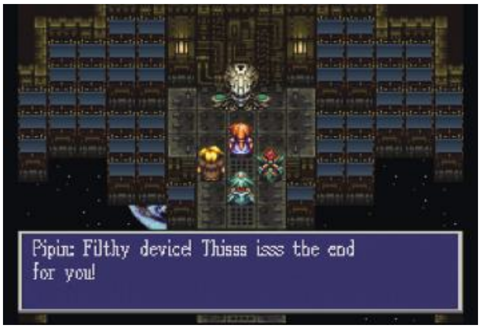
Rudra no Hihou

Developer: Square | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SFC

Directed by Kouze Ide and supervised by Akitoshi Kawazu, along with some of the staff from *Final Fantasy Legend III* and *Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest*, *Rudra no Hihou*, fan-translated by Aeon Genesis as “Treasure of the Rudras”, was Square’s swansong on the Super Famicom, released in early 1996.

It tells the story of the last 15 days of humanity before its scheduled extinction by the hand of the Rudra, a god of destruction who comes every 4000 years to cleanse the world and make way for a new dominant species. The world is terribly polluted and seems on the verge of death in any case. The knight Sion, the priest Riza, and the archaeologist Surlent are endowed with stones embedded in their bodies, known as the Jade, which mark their destiny. Along the way, they will encounter remnants of the four previous dominant species; the Giants, the Reptiles, the Merfolk, and the Danan. Together, the heroes set forth to discover the truth of the world, cleanse it, and save its peoples.

What sets *Rudra* apart from just about every other game out there is its magic crafting, called the Word Spirit System. Based upon the belief that words inherently hold power, the player can scribe any of the given words they wish into the spellbook and have the characters cast a spell based on it. The cost and result of the word, which the Aeon Genesis translation calls a Mantra, are dependent upon just what the word is. There are rules one can follow that work on a “prefix-root-suffix” basis – the root is typically an elemental type, while the prefixes and suffixes modify the root in various ways, increasing their strength or adding a multi-target ability, at the expense of increased MP usage. Any word will produce something, even if the effects are nearly useless.

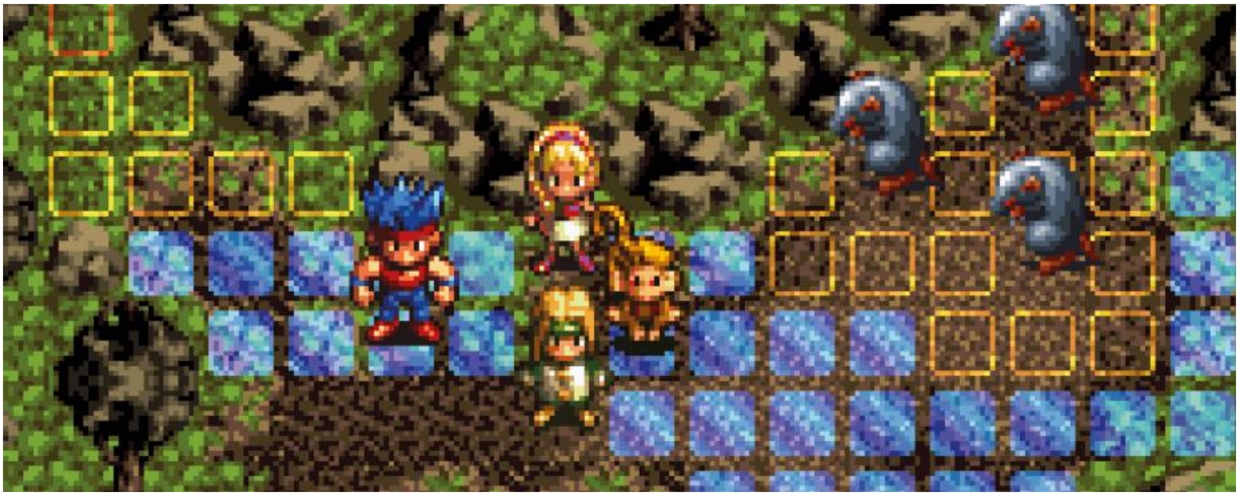


Pipin: Filthy device! Thisss isss the end
for you!

The unusual spellcrafting system is at the centre of this late Super Famicom game from Square.

Several words are used in the world, the story, or even by monsters, and if the player wishes, they may scribe these words themselves and make use of them. Each of the three main characters has their own 15-day-long scenario, all of which run concurrently, with the various protagonists even encountering and interacting with one another at various points. The player can even stop playing one character and switch to another just about whenever they please.

Rudra no Hihou is the last game that Squaresoft released on the SFC, and it makes full use of their experience with the hardware, featuring gorgeous character art, courtesy of Keita Amemiya. The score is credited to Ryuji Sasai of *Mystic Quest* fame, and makes strong use of the multi-scenario system by giving each character their own overworld and battle themes. The game features strong threads of environmentalism and racial solidarity that tell us that the only way to fix the problems is to survive and the only way to survive, is to fix the problems, in stark contrast to the idea that the environment can only be saved by human extinction, as was common in Japanese games and stories of the ’90s.



Treasure Hunter G

Developer: Square/Sting | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SFC

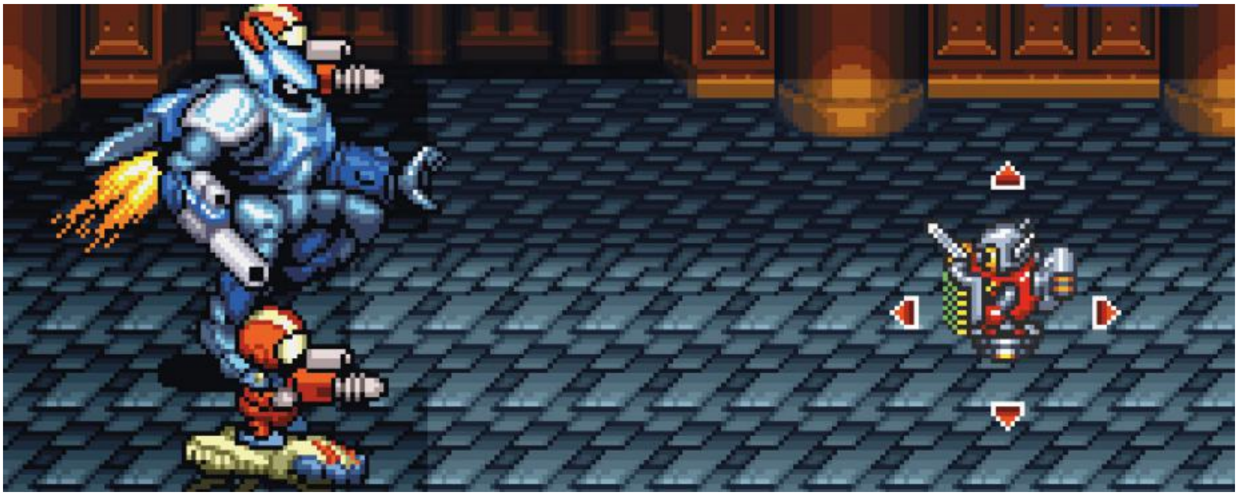
Square didn't often work with outside companies, but their collaboration with Sting worked well for this late Super Famicom release.

Long before its ambitious *Dept. Heaven* series (*Riviera*, *Yggdra Union*, etc.), Sting was a developer made up of ex-Compile employees. In 1996, they partnered with Square for their first RPG, *Treasure Hunter G*. Directed by *Puyo Puyo* creator Kazunari Yonemitsu and produced by the legendary Hironobu Sakaguchi, *Treasure Hunter G* would be Square's final 16-bit release, capping off an inventive start to the year that encompassed *Rudra no Hihou* and *Bahamut Lagoon*.

Brothers Red and Blue G are watched over by their grandfather Silver in the town of Ruuri, as their father Brown – the titular Treasure Hunter G – neglects his family in favour of adventure. When the brothers hear that Brown is investigating the presence of a hi-tech aircraft, the Ferric Falcon, they grow restless and convince Silver to follow their father's trail. The trio arrive just in time to see Brown hop into the Falcon and take to the skies, pursued by a mysterious army. Unfortunately, the soldiers set their sights on Ruuri, burning the village to cinders. Silver doesn't survive, leaving Red and Blue alone. The duo partner with Rain, a mysterious girl pursued by monsters, and her "pet" Ponga, a monkey capable of understanding human speech. The four set off to eventually challenge the Dark Lord, who wishes to revive the awkwardly named Bone Dino.

The battle system is where *Treasure Hunter G* truly shines. Enemies appear on the map, à la *Chrono Trigger*, and running into one transports you onto a small turn-based strategy grid. Each character expends Action Points (AP) to move and act. Whacking an enemy is as simple as hitting the A button, and menu navigation is limited to item usage, spellcasting, and ending a turn prematurely. Tactics are more important than levels, and the key to success is making optimal use of each party member's speciality: Red is your standard fighter, Rain becomes an essential healer following a key scene early in the game, while Ponga is an expert at ranged combat, with his boomerangs and wide variety of black magic. Blue has perhaps the most surprising expertise, as he specialises in traps – particularly landmines and teleport tiles. As trapped tiles are unmarked, you must be mindful of their positions so as to not blow up your own party members, but teleport tiles are an essential way for allies to move around the map while expending minimal AP.

Treasure Hunter G's visual style is a blend of crisp chip art and pre-rendered CG, à la *Super Mario RPG*, and while its environments look lovely, its assets haven't aged well. The music, on the other hand, is timeless, helmed by a pre-Basiscape Hitoshi Sakimoto and Masaharu Iwata. It's a lighthearted game that's frequently comical; barrel-clad monsters cover their shame when you destroy their attire, and a mad scientist's parrot, who usually mimics the last word of each of his master's sentences, turns erudite to express delicate matters. It also doesn't overstay its welcome, clocking in at a brisk 20 hours. *Treasure Hunter G* remains a valuable delight.



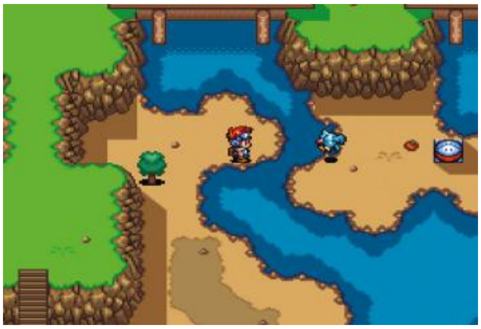
Robotrek

Developer: Quintet/Ancient | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SFC

Following hot on the heels of *Illusion of Gaia, Robotrek* is definitely the black sheep of Quintet's 16-bit oeuvre. Developed in collaboration with Yuzo Koshiro's studio Ancient, it's Quintet's first turn-based RPG. Most notably, *Robotrek* breaks from Quintet's theme du jour – death and rebirth – in favour of a lighthearted, sci-fi romp about mischievous criminals and the budding robotics prodigy set to stop them.

Originally titled *Slapstick* in Japan, *Robotrek* was obviously intended for a younger audience. Enix America tried to obfuscate this, likely changing the title to be evocative of both *Robotech* and *Star Trek*, while trading the gag-filled, manga-esque box art for a moody painting of a space station. The game itself, however, couldn't be any cuter. The world is colourful and exaggerated, while the always-adorable monsters wouldn't be out of place in any cute-'em-up. The game's intro details the rise of the crime syndicate Hackers, and its reign of terror: stomping sandcastles and causing minor traffic violations, which is pretty delightful.

Set in the near-future on Planet Quintenix, the game opens in the town of Rococo during the autumn, where the protagonist, the young son of the genius Dr. Akihabara, moves in with his father, his father's assistant, Nagisa, and their cat, Kurogane. The Good Doctor is kind of a lousy father, frequently leaving his son for extended periods while he does mad scientist things. Fortunately, Nagisa is eager to cultivate the hero's thirst for knowledge, and begins teaching him the ins and outs of robotics.



While the player controls the protagonist during exploration, it's the robots he builds who serve as his champions. Dr. Akihabara has built an extensive R&D lab in his basement, where development is comically handled by a husband-and-wife team of gnomes, who pop out to hand-build robots when required. At level one, robots start with 40 points, which can be freely distributed between various stats; an additional ten points are awarded per robot with each level-up, and a robot can be fully re-specced when levelling or at any R&D station. R&D is also used to invent items like repair kits and weapons, using level-gated invention manuals found on throughout the world.

While the player is eventually able to maintain the maximum stock of three robots, only one takes to the field at a time; combat mixes turn-based strategy with *Final Fantasy*'s ATB system. A robot is only able to take action once it's fully charged; each action depletes its charge meter by a different amount; the charge level then governs the duration until the robot can next act. Mêlée attacks deplete the least charge, hard-hitting bombs cost a fair chunk, and the most intensive programmable combos drain it completely.

Despite its kid-friendly exterior, *Robotrek* is an exceedingly hard game; judicious stat builds and actions mean the difference between victory and defeat. Combined with its massive dungeons, which entirely lack savepoints, *Robotrek* is an unlikely hardcore experience.

ROBOTREK
SUPER NINTENDO

The sci-fi themed American cover art hides the fact that *Robotrek* is indeed a pretty goofy game.

GOD: Growth or Devolution

Developer: Infinity Co./Third Stage | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SFC, PS1

GOD: Mezame yo to Yobu Koe ga Kikoe ("Growth or Devolution: Heed the Call to Awaken") begins with a young boy named Gen, who starts a journey to visit his grandmother. Along the way, he discovers some ancient aliens lying dormant in a mountain, who summarily awaken and then begin to wage war on the Earth. He falls asleep for ten years, after which he finds he has psychic powers. Humanity has been fighting for the past decade, led by a worldwide faction called Bless. Gen begins his journey to find other humans with awakening powers and take down the aliens.

Published by Imagineer, *GOD* was developed with the input of various celebrities. The story was written by playwright Shouji Koukami, the character art was provided by artist Tatsuya Egawa (known internationally for the rather salacious manga *Golden Boy*), and the soundtrack was supervised by flashy rock musician Demon Kogure. The story seems to rip off *EarthBound* a little too much, at least initially, but it quickly finds its own voice once the hero begins his journey. The game world is a post-apocalyptic one, with the first part of the game taking place in Japan but later expanding to other real-world locations, including England and France (whose survivors are holed up together in the Channel Tunnel), Russia, the United States, Easter Island, and Egypt. The story revolves around various occult "ancient aliens" theories, and at the end of the game, you'll fight God. (It's in the title, so it's not really a spoiler.)

GOD is a cult classic, thank to its brand of storytelling, which contrasts depressing developments with ridiculous comedy. There's some dark stuff that goes down in this game – two of your party members end up becoming a couple and boy do things not work out well for them, and the fate of Gen's mother hangs constantly in the balance – but the same time, the dialogue is filled with parodies and references to other video games (RPG or otherwise), as well as assorted Japanese pop culture references. There's a play on the *Dragon Quest* Medal King called the Manjuu King, who collects steamed buns from all over the globe, and there are other silly bits, like when you travel around Australia with a lemur as your companion. Outside of the story, it looks, sounds, and plays like a typical JRPG. Battles are a little slow and the interface is unresponsive, though a chakra system to guide characters into learning skills adds a little bit of customisation.

Being a 1996 release for the Super Famicom, the game was largely ignored upon release, but Imagineer tried again a few years later with a port for the PlayStation, dubbed *GOD Pure*. One of the main issues with the original was that the visuals were pretty generic, especially in the various international cities you'd visit, so this version fixes that by re-doing all of the towns with unique backgrounds, though the rest of the game doesn't look much different. It is a little speedier, plus some story events have changed, though much of it remains faithful to the Super Famicom game.

Tatsuya Egawa's illustrations are quite distinctive, though none of that character really makes it into the game itself, which mostly looks incredibly generic.

Love Quest

Developer: Tokuma Shoten | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC

There have been plenty of parody JRPGs, though none takes the mickey so much as *Love Quest*. The main character is a pathetic Mummy's boy, who's somehow found himself a fiancée ... except right before they get married, she mysteriously disappears from before his very eyes, causing him to search various sections of Tokyo to find her.

Love Quest has a sense of awareness of itself not present in any other RPG. The NPCs talk as if they are actors (and not particularly professional ones), forgetting their lines and asking that you talk to them again, or discussing supporting roles in other games. Sometimes their speech is just garbled text, and in other cases it's accompanied with a warning that their text was cut due to content standards. Was it actually too dirty for Nintendo and cut during review, or is it just a joke? It's not really clear, but it's funny either way. It also has a very self-deprecating sense of humour, referring to itself as "kusoge" ("crappy game"), or apologising for its poor quality. At one point, someone even uses a flyer for the game as toilet paper.

It's doubly amusing due to the fact that the game is actually not bad at all. It is a pretty typical *Dragon Quest* clone, but the mundane, modern-day setting, even with its bit of magical realism, already gives it a particular identity. In the "fight" scenes, you're cornered by various women, who needs to be "attacked" by talking to them, and will eventually leave you alone once you've chatted enough. The ladies here are drawn in a cartoony style similar to *Crayon Shin-Chan*, while the "boss" women, who are presented as full screen portraits, were provided by manga artist Hikaru Yukuzi, and look like they came straight out of a shoujo manga. In spite of the premise, and some slightly mature jokes, it's not really an "adult" game, either, and as it's on a Nintendo platform, there's no nudity or anything particularly salacious. The equivalent would be something like Sierra's classic adventure game *Leisure Suit Larry*, although that was certainly a bit saucier.

Love Quest was originally developed as a Famicom game and set to be released in 1994, but due to market concerns, it was scrapped and remade for the Super Famicom. It ended up being published within a week of *Chrono Trigger*, and was consequently completely demolished in sales terms. However, its reputation as a gag-filled "bakage" ("silly game") has increased over the years, giving it a unique allure among RPG fans. Hilariously, right at the beginning, you're given a "YES/NO" question as to whether you'd like to rescue your fiancée. Answer "NO" repeatedly, and the game ends, complete with a credit roll. It then portrays the player, in the real world, returning the game to the store since they were able to beat it immediately, and getting frustrated by only getting 200 yen in exchange, since everyone else is also trading it in. Ironically, while most popular Super Famicom RPGs can be had on the aftermarket dirt cheap, *Love Quest* ranks as one of the more expensive cartridges.

SUPER FAMICOM
Love Quest

***Love Quest* seems to have a low opinion of itself, but it really shouldn't, because it is a remarkably funny and subversive title.**

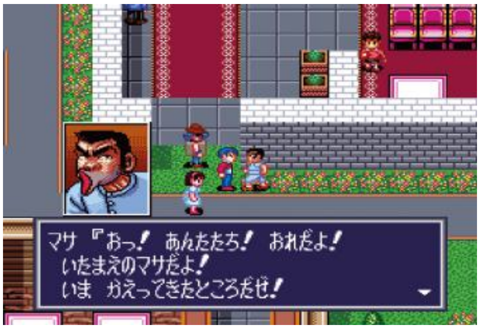
Maka Maka

Developer: Office Koukan | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): SFC

The quintessential 16-bit kusoge JRPG, *Maka Maka* is to the Super Famicom as *Hoshi wo Miru Hito* was to the Famicom. Its selling point was its scenario and art by gag mangaka Koji Aihara (*Even a Monkey Can Draw Manga*), but this quickly became overshadowed by just how broken it was. It was developed by Office Koukan, a fairly small studio behind several awful *Hokuto no Ken* games.

The story opens in the castle of the fiendish Dr. Maka Maka, a musclebound man in tiny underwear and the leader of the nefarious Maka Maka Syndicate. Flanked by a giant nose with limbs, a cat girl, a naga, and an army of cosplay ant men, Maka Maka unveils his super-weapon, which can turn the Earth's population into water fleas. As a test, he aims it at a single spot ...

Cut to Hometown Village, where a bolt of lightning transforms teenager Corum's parents into water fleas! Not knowing what else to do, Corum consults his girlfriend Elle, who suggests he track down her father, the brilliant Dr. Pascal. Also wrapped up in this is a reincarnation story; Corum can unlock memories of his past life, enabling him to use magic. It's a wacky storyline, full of colourful party members, like Johnny, a cowboy hobo who wears a box of oranges; or UruUruBoy, an Ultraman parody with tears streaming down his face ("uru-uru" meaning "to be misty-eyed"). It's also a nightmare to play: Corum's walking speed is a snail's pace and there's no run button. Inexplicably, for a cartridge game, loading delays are frequent.



マサ『おっ！ あんたたち！ おれだよ！
いたまえのマサだよ！
いま かえってきたところだぜ！

And that's to say nothing of the bugs. Only Corum can use magic outside of battle, rendering several other characters' spells useless. Sometimes sprites get scrambled. Sometimes levelling up resets your stats to zero. The final boss starts out as a tiny baby with 30,000 HP, before transforming into a demon with a single hitpoint, and it's debatable whether that's intentional subversion or a programming oversight. There's also the infamous "Shuffle Bug", in which repeatedly passing items between a single party member causes a memory overrun, garbling the code even further. This allows players to clip through the map and also makes key items available in shops.

It's a shame that *Maka Maka* is so broken, because it's actually incredibly charming. Aihara's character designs (save for an abhorrent racist caricature) are a joy, especially the large, pun-filled bestiary of weirdos. It did the self-aware, self-satirising RPG thing long before Nippon Ichi's oeuvre; the faceless mooks you fight are all called "zako", the Japanese term for, well, faceless mooks. One town is full of people who've been turned into croquettes by a gluttonous princess, who then eats you whole before expelling you with an explosion of flatus. It's crass, stupid, and pretty entertaining.

The game ends with a wedding featuring the entire cast. The blocking is completely wrong, so everybody ends up addressing a pillar before exiting through a wall. Somehow it's a perfect metaphor for *Maka Maka*: a broken mess filled with heart.

***Maka Maka* is filled with so many bugs from start to finish that even its closing credits can't be displayed properly.**

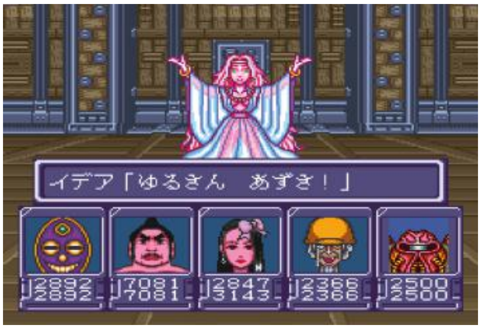
Idea no Hi

Developer: Office Koukan | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SFC

After the disaster that was *Maka Maka*, Office Koukan and Koji Aihara got back together to right what went wrong. Though still a little clunky and buggy in places, this follow-up, *Idea no Hi* ("Day of the Idea"), is Office Koukan's redemption.

Again conceptualised and illustrated by Aihara, *Idea no Hi* is far darker than *Maka Maka*. Set on a post-apocalyptic Earth, it stars Kamekichi, a young orphan with latent psychic abilities. Under the instruction of the mad Dr. Poe, he's captured and tortured daily in an attempt to draw out the true potential of his pyrokinesis. When Kamekichi's torture begins to show diminishing returns, Dr. Poe straps his victim's beloved dog Pesu to a table and forces Kamekichi to watch as his pet is tortured to death. The experiment works, and Kamekichi's rage boils over, killing most of the scientists before Dr. Poe manages to escape. From there, Kamekichi hits the road searching for answers. Soon, he finds companionship with a polite sumo wrestler, a delinquent schoolgirl, a hedgehog, and others, before getting caught up in the schemes of a malevolent figure named Idea. While largely by-the-numbers in terms of mechanics, there are some cool innovations for a game of *Idea no Hi*'s vintage: Kamekichi gets a memo pad to record info and clues, and each character has a unique Limit Break-style attack once they take enough damage.

Despite the incredibly bleak setting, *Idea no Hi* definitely bears Aihara's subversive sense of humour. At one point you can be impregnated by aliens, give birth, and have your baby join the party. The monsters Kamekichi faces are in Aihara's usual gag-manga style, like chickens with baby faces, bespectacled grenades, and equivalent of Metal Slime (from *Dragon Quest*) is a Jizo statue with a scrotum for a head. Even Freddy Krueger makes an appearance. Some monsters deal in the blackest of humour; a salaryman casts a death curse by hanging himself with his necktie.



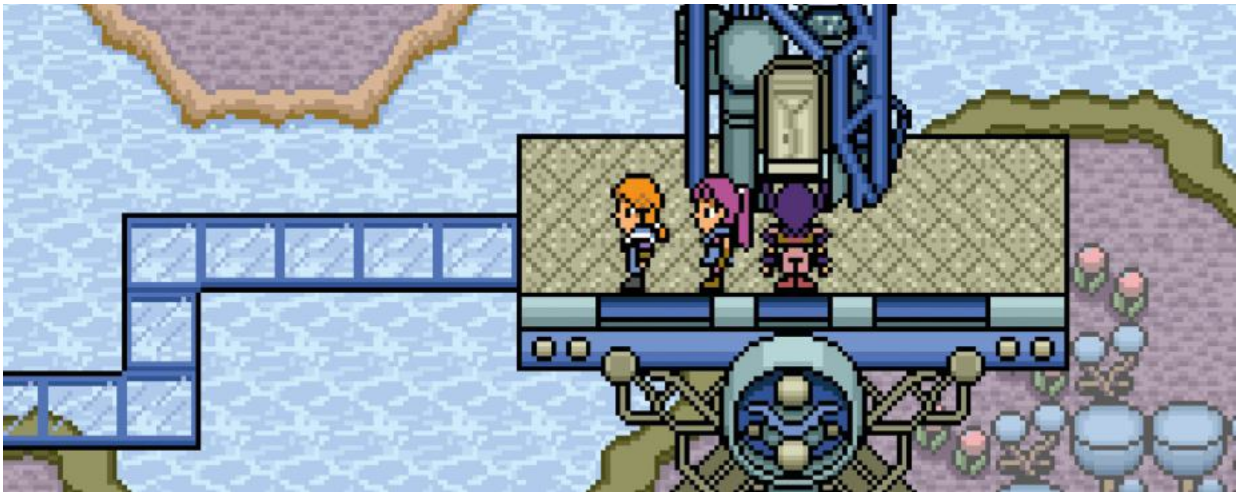
イデア「ゆるさん　あずき！」

SHOUEI
イデアの日
DAY OF THE IDEA
SHOUEI

***Maka Maka* was squarely in "so bad it's kinda good" territory, but *Idea no Hi* takes all of its potential and crafts a very solid game.**

Equipment is handled a little differently from the usual for JRPGs. Every item in a character's inventory has a battle function, even if that's ineffectively whipping a tank-top at a foe. What's extremely cool is that each human character is paper-dolled on their status screen to reflect what they have equipped. This again ties into Aihara's sense of humour, with stats reflecting each character's cross-dressing level, or their perversion level – do note that these are, thoughtfully, two different values. Characters can up their perversion level by wearing used underwear as helmets, and doing so is the only way to gain access to the exclusive Pervert Town. There are other, more standard, uses for clothes, too – characters need a full set of winter clothes to survive an icy dungeon, for example.

There are frustrating parts, like a sequence in which you drive a truck full of nitroglycerine; one bump and it's game over, and naturally the controls are terrible. Still, it's miraculous that the team behind *Maka Maka* were able to take another crack at a game, and largely come out successful.



Paladin’s Quest

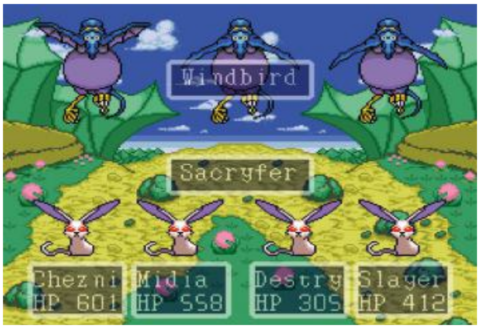
Developer: Copya Systems | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): SNES

Paladin’s Quest is often overlooked as just another 16-bit RPG. It’s slow and grindy, and the odd graphics are inconsistent. All of these statements may be true, though *Paladin’s Quest* is weird enough to earn its place in JRPG Valhalla.

The story opens on the warring nations of Naskuot and Saskuot. The protagonist is Chezni, a young teenager attending the Naskuot Magic School to pursue his dream of becoming a great spiritualist. As part of a dare, he unknowingly activates Dal Gren, a living machine sealed away hundreds of years earlier, due to its catastrophic nature, which destroys the school. So Chezni sets off to stop Dal Gren.

The first game developed by the late Hidenori Shibao, it’s indisputable how much care went into *Paladin’s Quest*’s setting. The Planet Lennus is a pastel-coloured world populated by original fantasy races of all shapes and sizes. A village of eggshell houses sits comfortably in a forest of geometric trees; another city is governed from the top of a glass tower designed to resemble a lily. Distinctly surreal monsters stalk the countryside; some are obese birds, others are ladybird men. Shibao enlisted the award-winning SF illustration team of Hiroyuki Katou and Keisuke Gotou to create the original concept art for his world, while Shuji Imai (*Nintendo Power*) designed the striking bestiary. There’s a very ’70s French science fiction vibe about *Paladin’s Quest*; the influence of René Laloux and Jean “Moebius” Giraud is readily apparent. Kouhei Tanaka handled the music, which is a fun blend of pleasant, relaxing songs and up-tempo pieces with odd synths.

Battles are first-person and turn-based, but with non-standard menus: commands are positioned around each cardinal direction, and taking action presents a list of each character’s body parts. It’s just as easy to swing a sword as it is to headbutt, kick, or bodyslam a foe. There’s also no MP: all spells cost HP to cast. This means there are also no healing spells, nor is magic usable outside of battle. There are only two permanent party members in *Paladin’s Quest*: Chezni, and Midia, his sort-of love interest. The rest of the party is filled out by minor characters who come and go as well as optional mercenaries.



PALADIN'S QUEST
SUPER NINTENDO

The generic American title of *Paladin’s Quest* does little to communicate how strangely entrancing its world is.

The writing is just as unequivocally strange as its world, and it doesn’t take itself remotely seriously. Early on, Chezni and Midia fight their way through an organic-looking cavern, only to be barfed out of a dragon’s mouth, having mistaken its anus for a cave. One town even has an 8-bit church, manned by a priest who apologises for being in the wrong game before making an exit.

None of this means *Paladin’s Quest* is an especially fun play, however. Dungeons are overlong mazes, the party walks at a snail’s pace, and each boss fight ends up as a war of attrition between Chezni’s party and a spongy mass of endless HP. Still, despite its myriad shortcomings, the uniquely bizarre Planet Lennus stands in stark contrast to the more conventional settings of its peers.

Lennus II

Developer: Fill-in-Cafe | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SFC

As Copya Systems restructured into Shangri-La Corp., the team behind *Paladin's Quest* left the company to join Fill-in-Cafe. The rights to the franchise remained with Asmik Ace, which allowed the original staff to develop a sequel. Released only in Japan and late in the Super Famicom's life cycle, *Lennus II: Apostles of the Seals* would see Katou and Gotou's concept art fully realised through some of the most striking artwork in the console's vast library. Although *Lennus II* bears a fresh coat of paint, its gameplay is more of the same, warts and all. Mercenaries are back, with an even more sizeable stable from which to choose, but at the expense of any plot-specific party members. With no secondary protagonist, this makes this sequel feel a little lonely.

Deep within the subterranean world of Andel, a council of elders holds a summoning ritual. They successfully awaken Farus, an ancient man from Planet Raiga, encased in crystal for thousands of years. Free from stasis and bewildered, he's forced into the role of saviour: Andel's continents are drifting apart, towards an all-encompassing void at the edge of the world. Given his pick of three out of five acolytes to accompany him, Farus sets off to save each continent individually.

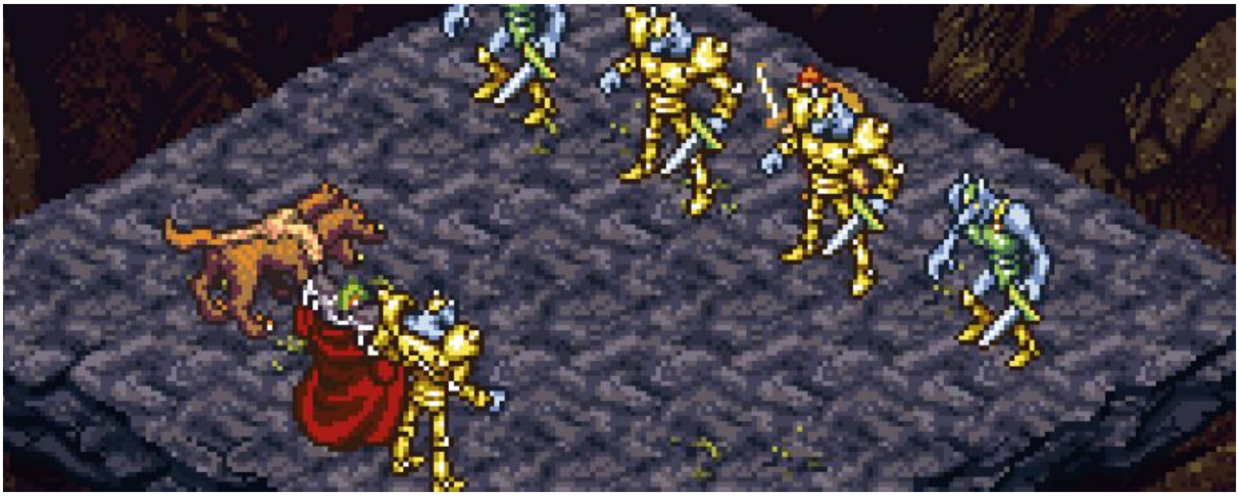
It soon becomes apparent that there's more going on: each time Farus carries out his duty, he's contacted by a psychic voice that pleads with him to cease his actions. Once Farus has completed his task, a wave of destruction rocks Andel, destroying the remaining land and decimating the population. Farus himself is saved, and sent to Eltz, the surface of the planet under which Andel rests. The prophecy was a lie propagated by Granada, an evil god set on the annihilation of all life. Farus finds that mysterious voice, which is more than a little pissed off. As penance, Farus is tasked to gather eight seals to stop Granada's apocalyptic plan.

Farus
HP1933
Nikita
HP 208
HP 0
Faint
Jenka
HP 0
Faint

This sequel to *Paladin's Quest* got no English release, and it's easy to see why, though it's still an interesting game in spite of its flaws.

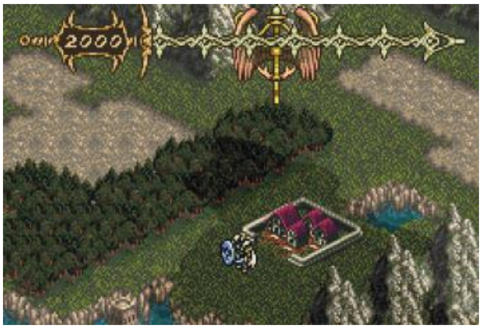
The quest for the seals is where the game opens up, allowing players to pursue the first seven in any order they please. Many of these sit within formidable dungeons, while others get into some fun adventure-game territory, including a chain of deals that culminates in making an obese woman levitate to allow Farus to snatch the seal from beneath her. Once the seals are gathered, it's back to Planet Lennus, which provides a fun look at how things have changed since the previous game – and it's not for the better.

Occasionally the journey gets side-tracked by mini-games, which, while nice in theory, are almost always terrible in execution. Simply put, dexterity-based challenges are completely unsuited to the game's engine. While the majority of these are optional, the worst, an agonising jockey race, is not only mandatory, but requires Farus to finish first to proceed. *Lennus II* is ultimately a huge slog, a shame considering its distinctly creative setting. On the whole, *Lennus* is a series that's tough to recommend, though it's hard not to be enthralled by its exotic eccentricity.



Dark Half

Developer: Westone/Enix | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SFC



RPGs are filled with heroic do-gooders, but what if you could be the bad guy for once? That's the premise of Enix's *Dark Half*, which was a huge departure for developer Westone, largely known for the colourful and cutesy *Wonder Boy/Monster World* games. The villain here is the Dark Lord Rukyu, sealed away 1000 years ago by six brave warriors. He's been resurrected and is back, to not only take revenge, but also take over the world. And while he's remarkably powerful even after such a long nap, he still needs to regain his full strength to put him into world-ruling shape. However, the world of humans is not necessarily doomed, as a hero named Falco follows in his footsteps and gains strength to fight against the forces of evil. In the game's seven chapters, the story alternates between Rukyu's and Falco's viewpoints, before they finally meet for a climactic showdown.

The two characters play quite differently. Rukyu cannot equip items – he won't even bother opening treasure chests, since he considers human technology to be vastly beneath him – and instead attacks entirely with magic. He gains his strength primarily by capturing monsters, who will teach him their magic, and fight in his stead. Meanwhile, Falco plays like a regular JRPG hero, as he still needs to find and improve equipment, and drafts various fellow humans as party members. Neither character gains experience or levels up, though Falco can explore to find orbs that increase various stats. Both are governed by Soul Power, which dwindles with every step – if it hits zero, it's game over. Rukyu also needs it to cast magic, and obtains little bits of it by killing enemies in combat, allowing him to stay afloat. But the main way to increase it is by murdering innocent humans, reducing them to a helpless pile of bones. Falco, on the other hand, can purchase more Soul Power, providing he can find it. Additionally, if Falco touches one of the human corpses killed by Rukyu, it will yield a Ray of Hope; the ending depends on how many of these were collected, as well as which side the player chooses for the final encounter.

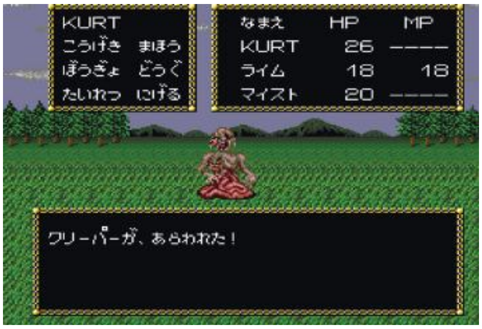
This is an outstanding premise, especially since it balances its cavalier attitude to violence and aura of despair with an element of hope. Alas, managing your Soul Power proves to be somewhat troublesome, since it forces you to play in a specific way so you don't run out. Rukyu can demolish almost anything, carelessly, so his chapters are relatively unchallenging; meanwhile, Falco and his buddies have to work much harder to build up their strength, and it's easy to end up under-powered. Adding to the aggravation, the game is displayed from an isometric perspective, and the dungeons absolutely love to hide things around corners, outside of the view of the player. Stumbling around, avoiding traps and hunting for switches, all while regularly being drawn into combat in the face of constantly dwindling resources, works out to be an incredibly frustrating experience. Still, a fascinating effort.

Being able to play as the bad guy seems like an interesting inversion of the formula, and it is, but it's hard not to feel bad for the various NPCs you heartlessly murder as Dark Lord Rukyu.

Jaseiken Necromancer

Developer: Hudson | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): PCE

As the first RPG on the PC Engine, Hudson's *Jaseiken Necromancer* ("Holy Demon Sword Necromancer") carried a lot of weight on its shoulders. In order to wow gamers into taking a chance on the then-new platform, the presentation goes dark and edgy – the cover artwork is by H.R. Giger, the title screen has a creepy talking face that introduces the game, and the enemies are based on H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. It also prides itself on goriness – one of the first foes you meet is a zombie with pulsating guts spilling out of its lower half, and dispatched enemies splurt blood.



なまえ	HP	MP
KURT	26	-----
ライム	18	18
マイスト	20	-----

クリーパーが、あらわれた！

Otherwise, this is a typical *Dragon Quest* clone. Beyond the goriness, the character sprites are larger and look a little more like those in a Western RPG, though most of the rest of the visuals are standard late '80s JRPG stuff, and its premise as a gothic horror RPG goes under-utilised. To support the main hero, you can choose two companions (out of five) with varying abilities, though you can't switch once you commit. However, the balance is so poor that the difficulty varies wildly, depending on your choice. Even then, it's a rough game, particularly due to the combat formula's over-reliance on the agility stat, as well as the exasperating password save system.

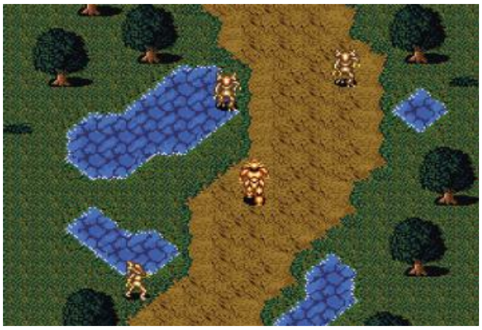
Though not a great game, there's some nostalgia in Japan for it, which led to a (now de-listed) mobile port, then a brand new sequel called *Jaseiken Necromancer: Nightmare Reborn*, which was eventually ported to the Nintendo DSiWare download service. It's been modernised, and features similarly gruesome enemies and a creepy atmosphere as its selling points.

The H.R. Giger cover artwork, along with the creepy enemy sprites, mean that *Jaseiken Necromancer* makes a striking impression.

Susano Oh Densetsu

Developer: Hudson | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): PCE

Susano Oh Densetsu is based on the Go Nagai manga *Susano Oh*. Beginning in contemporary Japan, the protagonist is Shingo Susa, who joins his school's psychic club, only to learn he's the reincarnation of the Shinto deity Susano. Things just get wilder from there, as he ends up turning into Yamata no Orochi, the eight-headed serpent, and summons demons from other dimensions. The concept is similar to that of *Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei*, the novel series that spun off into an RPG series. The original *Susano Oh* manga never quite resolved the story; this PC Engine RPG basically picks up where it left off, with the Earth more or less in ruins. Various gods have separated from Shingo and now rule the land, so he must hunt them down and defeat them. Shingo is alone at the outset, though he can hire party members in bars to fight alongside him, and eventually he'll join up with Sayuri Yukishiro and Rei Uryu from the original story; there are also cameos from characters in *Violence Jack*, another manga from Go Nagai.



Many of Hudson's PC Engine RPGs were in the vein of *Dragon Quest*, but *Susano Oh Densetsu* is a bit different. It's one of the few RPGs of the late '80s to do away with random battles; instead its enemies are visible on the field. Battles are presented from an overhead perspective, and each character has a limited number of turns in which to move or attack. There are a variety of weapons, like bowguns that can fire from long range, or swords that attack enemies in a circle, as well as ESP powers. The slow text speed and grindiness still make things slow going, but it's still unlike most other games being made at the time.

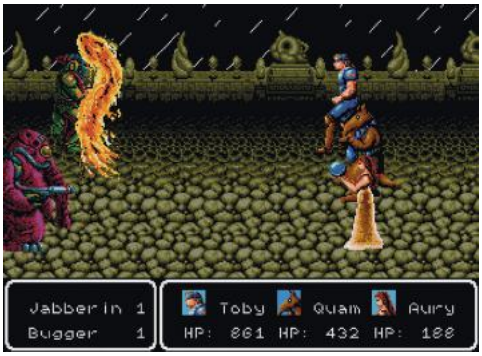
***Susano Oh Densetsu* predates *Megami Tensei II* for the Famicom by about a year, but it has a similar premise, as you fight demons in post-apocalyptic Japan.**

Star Odyssey

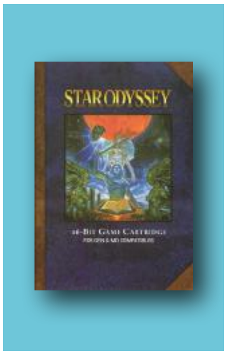
Developer: Hot-B | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): MD

Hot-B wasn't exactly known for quality RPGs – it made the terrible Famicom game *Hoshi wo Miru Hito*, after all – but it tried again with this early Mega Drive sci-fi title, in which you control a young man encouraged by a mysterious voice to explore the galaxy, aiming to protect it from a great threat. There are some cool party members who join you, including a dragon-like creature, an anteater-type alien, and a weird-looking cyborg.

Battles are viewed from a side-on perspective, but they look ridiculous, thanks to the gigantic, realistically proportioned characters and absolutely atrocious animation, which has them flying around the screen like plastic dolls. There are also issues typical of early '90s RPGs, like constant random battles, unnecessarily large and repetitive dungeons, and absurdly limited inventory space, but *Star Odyssey* is more frustrating than usual due to the enemies that scale up to your level. In other words, it actually punishes grinding. Altogether, it tries to be like *Phantasy Star*, and it doesn't quite get there, coming off more like a poor rip-off. The best that can be said is that it's not the complete disaster that *Hoshi wo Miru Hito* was.



Known as *Blue Almanac* in Japan, *Star Odyssey* was advertised for American release, to be published by Sage's Creation. It was cancelled, but resurrected in 2011 by Super Fighter Team, the same indie company that localised some mid-'90s Chinese RPGs, like *Legend of Wukong* and *Beggar Prince*. They fixed up some bugs, gave it a decent localisation, and put out physical copies in limited quantities, though it's since been distributed as a free download, as it can no longer be purchased.



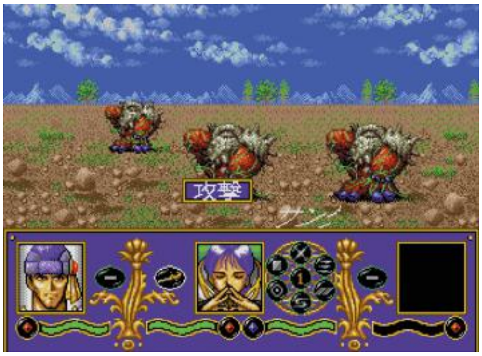
Hot-B was big on sci-fi RPGs, producing not only *Hoshi wo Miru Hito,* but also very early games like *Psychic City* and *Kaleidoscope,* but they just weren't good at making them.

Surging Aura

Developer: SEGA/Japan Media | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): MD

One of the last RPGs released on the Mega Drive, *Surging Aura* puts you into the shoes of a magician named Muu, who must save his kingdom of Pasphalda. It looks and feels somewhat like an Arabian take on *Phantasy Star*, and also features character designs by Mutsumi Inomata, who would later become popular through her work on Namco's *Tales* series.

The real-time battle system here is unique, being a bit like *Final Fantasy*'s Active Time Battle system, but viewed from a first-person perspective. Muu is always in the centre of the party and has a wide variety of magic available. However, these spells take time to chant (the incantation appears in wavy letters at the bottom of the window), and if an enemy hits him during this time, he'll either pause for a few moments or be forced to restart completely. This is where his two battle companions come in, as they can opt to attack directly, or choose to use their turns to defend Muu, thereby allowing him to cast his spell safely. There are also front and back rows, which enemies routinely jump between, and foes in the back row can only be reached with certain types of attack.



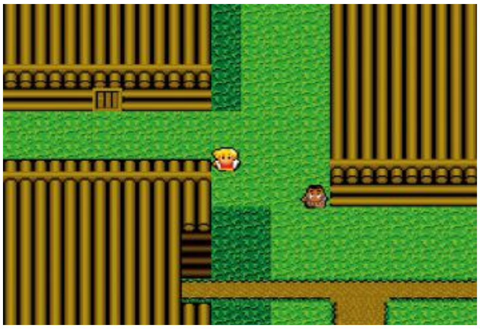
The game certainly is unique, but the interface is quite cumbersome, especially since there are 36 spells, and managing all three characters in real time can be overwhelming. The encounter rate is also very high in the overworld (much lower in dungeons, thankfully), so you end up spending a lot of time in battles. And while the setting is cool, the storytelling just isn't on the level of *Phantasy Star IV*. The result is a game that's interesting, but not particularly great.

MEGA DRIVE
Surging Aura
SEGA

***Surging Aura* can't quite live up to its promise as an *Arabian Nights* take of *Phantasy Star,* but the artwork sure is pretty.**

Funky Horror Band

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): MCD



F.H.B
FUNKY HORROR BAND
SEGA

The PC Engine CD got *Tengai Makyou: Ziria* as the first RPG on the platform, while the Mega CD got … this. The FHB, or Funky Horror Band, is a virtual music group consisting of aliens, created by Victor Music Industry. In the context of the game, they've crash-landed on the planet Woodstock, which is where the human-like protagonist resides. It calls itself a musical RPG – instead of "HP" you have "NR" ("nori" or "rhythm"), and you attack with melodies instead of weapons, plus most of the enemies are parodies of famous musicians.

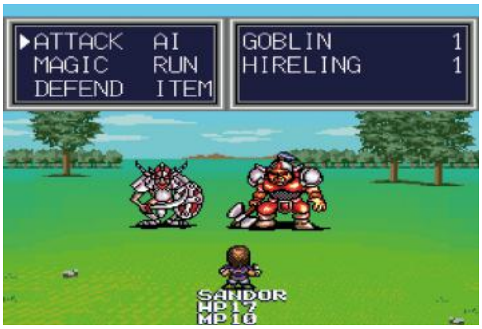
In spite of the unique concept, it basically looks and plays just like a *Dragon Quest* clone. And not even a particularly good one – outside of the close-ups of the aliens (which are all remarkably ugly), the visuals are barely better than in a Famicom game, and look markedly worse than almost any Mega Drive RPG previously released. Obviously, this is an awful disadvantage when you're trying to sell an expensive add-on to console owners. The game balance is a little weird, as you don't gain experience, but instead increase stats by means of items dropped by enemies. Not that it'll take very long – there are five chapters, and two are non-interactive music performances by the band. The whole game can be beaten in less than an hour. The vocal music from the band is not too bad for '90s J-pop – they actually released four albums of original music after this game – but the in-game chip-based music is terrible.

Funky Horror Band is regarded as one of the worst RPGs of the era – at release, there were rumours that stores literally had to give them away to clear stock, and that it was worth grabbing just for the free CD case.

An RPG as a concept album is a great idea, so too bad this was very obviously rushed out to meet the Mega CD release.

Vay

Developer: Hertz | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SCD, IOS



Developed by Hertz and published by SIMS, a company that worked closely with SEGA until finally purchased by them, *Vay* was positioned as the follow-up to *Lunar: The Silver Star*, being another epic role-playing game for the SEGA CD. It stars Prince Sandor, whose wedding is crashed by the henchmen of the evil Danek Empire, who then kidnap his betrothed, flying in fantasy mechas similar to those in the classic early '80s anime *Aura Battler Dunbine*. To rescue her, he must find the legendary suit of armour called Vay.

While the cutscenes are decent (if sparse) and the music is fantastic (particularly the battle themes), *Vay* is otherwise nowhere near the same league as *Lunar*, particularly because the characters just don't have remotely the same appeal. The English version was localised by Working Designs, which helped spice things up with their usual goofy NPC dialogue, though it went overboard by giving a wind fairy transportation powers via farting (you need a gas mask item when you use this, or you'll all be killed). This kind of humour is hit or miss, and the story just doesn't have much going for it otherwise. The battles are simple, viewed from an over-the-shoulder perspective. The random encounter is rate is pretty high, and lots of grinding is required, though the speed is very quick, and fights are often resolved in a matter of seconds.

Curiously, *Vay* saw re-release on iOS platforms courtesy of SoMoGa. Some graphics have been redrawn, others are taken straight from the SEGA CD, so it's a mish-mash of styles. It uses a different translation too, as Sandor goes by his original name of Heibelger.

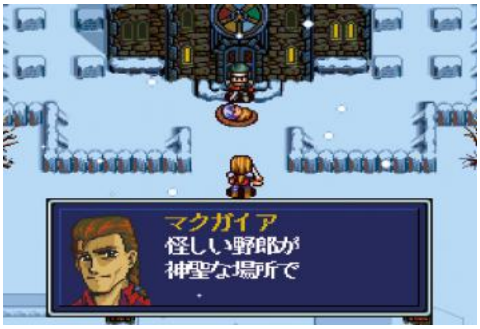
***Vay* isn't bad, though it surely isn't a deserving follow-up to *Lunar*, but at least the music is pretty good.**

Seiya Monogatari: Anearth Fantasy Stories

Developer: Hudson/Media Works | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): PCECD, SAT

Seiya Monogatari ("Holy Night Tale"): *Anearth Fantasy Stories* begins on Christmas Eve, as an infant is left on the steps of a church. You can make it cry, using a controller button, to attract the attention of one of the three passers by (or you can wait so the church nun will find you). Your choice here will determine who adopts the baby, who is obviously the protagonist, and how he grows up. This selects not only the prologue you see, but also the protagonist's class, though the rest of the game is mostly the same. Once he reaches the age of 15, he ventures out into the world to find out who his mother was. The story was provided by Atsushi Li, who previously worked on *Emerald Dragon*.

There are no random encounters, just scripted battles that occur as you progress through the story. There are no experience levels either, as you instead gain stats based on your battle actions, à la *Final Fantasy II*. This might sound like a neat idea, but in practice it's a pain, because you can't pick and choose your fights, your resources are limited, and you can end up under-powered.



マクガイア
怪しい野郎が
神聖な場所で

The story is surely ambitious, and the visuals are some of the best seen in a PC Engine RPG. But the only cinematic sequences are at the beginning and end, voice acting is sparse, and the game is rather short. This was the last Hudson game for the platform, and it was planned as a franchise. But while they ported it to the Saturn a while later, revising the visuals and adding some extra events, it still didn't really take off, and the series never reached its potential.

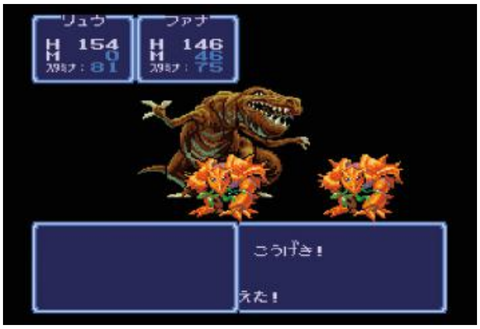
The idea of choosing your character class by picking your adoptive parent is really unique, but it doesn't play as big a role in this story as it should.

Gdleen

Developer: Jorudan | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): SFC

Jikou Wakusei Gdleen ("Self-Propelled Planet Gdleen", pronounced "gadruin") is a sci-fi novel series written by Yuuto Ramon. Consisting of seven volumes altogether, it was the subject of an anime OVA, as well as this video game, which was the first RPG released on the Super Famicom. The protagonist is a man named Ryuu, an Earthling travelling through space, who ends up getting stranded on the planet Gdleen when his ship crash-lands. It's a unique blend of fantasy and sci-fi, with some particularly cool monster designs, as the planet is inhabited by dinosaurs and the like. The story takes place in the same shared universe as Ramon's *Minelvaton* series, including the PC game *Digan no Maseki*.

The battle system is similar to *Dragon Quest's*, but with a few unique commands. These include a counterattack stance, in which you choose to defend specified fellow party members rather than just yourself, and the ability to negotiate with monsters. They can then lend their aid, though it's not exactly *Shin Megami Tensei* when it comes to complexity. The enemy sprites are indeed well designed, a big step above what the Famicom could do. But the battle backgrounds are still stark black, à la *Dragon Quest*, except in boss battles, which is pretty underwhelming. The music is solid, though.



リュウ
H 154
M 0
スタミナ：81

ファナ
H 146
M 46
スタミナ：75

こうげき！

えた！

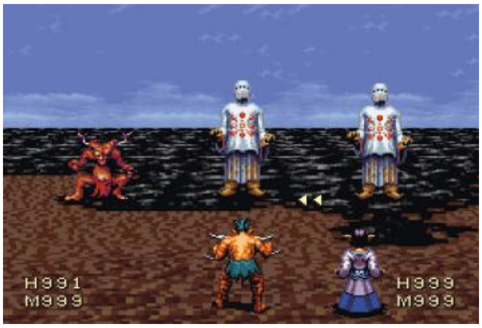
Altogether, it's an alright RPG with some difficulty-balance issues, but outside of the setting, is nothing special. It's mostly remembered for an early scene where Ryuu stumbles onto the heroine bathing nude in the lake. While not explicit, and indeed a trope common in manga/anime (as well as faithful to the OVA), it was rare to see a scene of this kind in a video game at the time.

スーパーファミコン
ガデュリン

The enemy designs in *Gdleen* are cool, but using stark black backgrounds in a 16-bit game comes off as really cheap.

The 7th Saga

Developer: Produce | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SNES



The 7th Saga
SUPER NINTENDO

In *The 7th Saga*, you are tasked with exploring the land of Ticondera to find seven runes. You can pick from one of seven characters – a knight, a dwarf, a cleric, an elf, a demon, an alien, or a robot – and set off on an adventure. The catch is, all of the characters you didn't choose decamp to various towns. When you encounter them, they can either join you or fight you, depending on various factors – some of it is random, but it's also based on how many runes you've found. This is very much an open-ended RPG, closer to a Western game than to *Final Fantasy*.

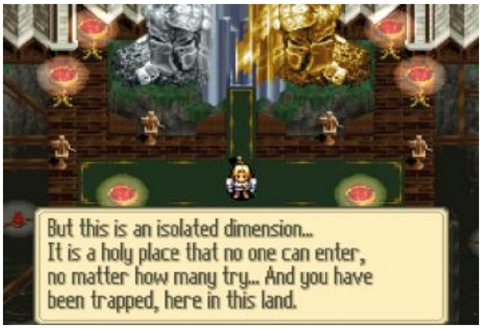
Encounters aren't actually random, but while enemies are not visible on the map, they are shown by the radar, which also points to other important locations. When fighting, the screen zooms in, using the pixelated spot where you're standing as the battlefield, viewed from an over-the-shoulder perspective. It's here that *The 7th Saga* is particularly difficult – the hit rate is fairly low, so fights tend to drag on, plus the stats were tweaked in the English version to make the game not only substantially more difficult but also much grindier. Plus, only two friendly characters can fight at once, and some are obviously more useful than others. The result is one of the most difficult, frustrating RPGs on the SNES. At least the runes you find have useful effects, like letting you warp between cities or doubling your attack.

This game is often soul-crushing, but its excellent music, fantastic monster design, and unique, unpredictable structure have earned it a reputation as a cult classic, even if you may need to resort to using a cheat device to enjoy it.

***The 7th Saga* is a fascinating game because it feels like a PC game from the '80s, complete with high ambitions and questionable execution.**

Mystic Ark

Developer: Produce | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC



But this is an isolated dimension...
It is a holy place that no one can enter,
no matter how many try... And you have
been trapped, here in this land.

In *Mystic Ark*, you are an adventurer who has been turned into a figurine and whisked away to a mysterious island. You are freed by a strange voice, and learn that you must travel across several different worlds and find arks to unlock the way home. These worlds are all quite unusual – there's a desert world of pirate cats, a world where everything consists of gigantic fruit, and a world without colour or sound. Other unfortunate adventurers have also been turned into figurines, but they can be rescued and will join your quest – these include a wizard, a robot, a warrior, a ninja, a demon, and a monk.

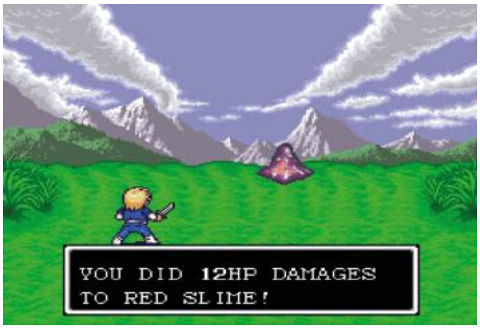
Mystic Ark was scheduled for release in English as *The 7th Saga II*, though ultimately it remained only in Japan. It's not quite a sequel, though it was developed by the same team, and there are some obvious similarities. Its focus on vignette-based storytelling gives it a more involving narrative, though all of the characters are blank slates without any personality, so they feel rather hollow. Combat is similar to that in *The 7th Saga*, even reusing some enemy sprites, though you can have three party members and it isn't nearly as difficult. Whenever you inspect certain objects, a menu comes up that lets you interact with them, giving it an adventure game feel.

The visuals are fantastic, with spritework that effectively replicates the work of fantasy artists Akihiro Yamada and Hitoshi Yoneda, while the soundtrack by Akihiko Mori (*Paladin's Quest*) is also brilliant. It's a creative game, though certain elements feel undercooked. A sequel, *Mystic Ark: Maboroshi Gekijo*, was released for the PlayStation, though it shifted genres to an adventure game.

***Mystic Ark* is more of a traditional JRPG than its predecessor, but still carves out its own identity.**

Secret of the Stars

Developer: Tecmo | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SNES


YOU DID 12HP DAMAGES
TO RED SLIME!

Secret of the Stars has an incredibly stereotypical premise – as a boy named Ray, you must collect members, to form a team called Aqutallion, to take down the evil Homncruse. There are five members of this squad, but there's also a secondary team called the Kustera, comprised of 11 different characters. You can swap them out, and there are a few points where controlling them is necessary to proceed. However, the implementation is undercooked, because you don't need them that often, and since they need to be levelled up separately, you'll need to spend some time grinding them up to the right level.

The battle system is standard, visually resembling *Lufia's*, with enemies in the centre and the current character standing off to one side. There are some combo moves you can pull off by casting and combining certain magic spells (and even some weapons), but that's about the only remotely novel thing it has going for it.

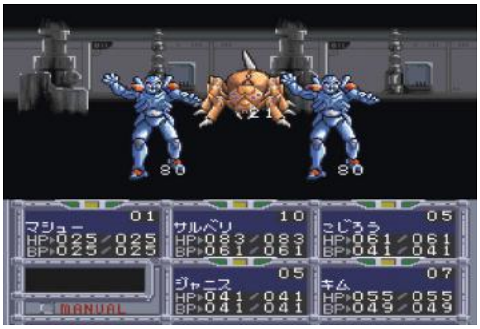
This is Tecmo's sole 16-bit RPG, and it's clearly not a good one. The visuals resemble those of an early SNES game, more like *Final Fantasy IV*, making it seem painfully dated compared to other games at the time of its North American release, in 1995. A few goofy enemies are novel, but not otherwise noteworthy. Probably the only interesting thing about it is that Tecmo decided to localise it into English, complete with a terrible translation and some goofy cover art that presents the main characters as children with multi-coloured hair. Even though such English language 16-bit JRPGs were generally treasured, just because they were so uncommon at the time, most gamers correctly pegged this one as a dud.

TECMO
SECRET OF THE STARS
SUPER NINTENDO

Tecmo wasn't big on RPGs, but they went from the decent Famicom game *Radia Senki* to this piece of junk.

Ryuuki Heidan Danzarb

Developer: Pandora Box/Yutaka | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SFC



Ryuuki Heidan Danzarb ("Dragon Calvary Danzarb") presents itself as a mecha TV show. Fittingly so, perhaps, because Gainax, the animation studio behind *Gunbuster* (and later, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*) was part of the project, contributing character and mechanical designs. (There were even plans for an anime, but these fell through.) The story focuses on a young man named Matthew Robin, who is drafted into the elite Danzarb Corps, which is waging war against the Damaia Army.

There are 15 scenarios, many of which have you facing off against various factions within the enemy, including the vicious Death River Corps, whose members do not fear death, and the all-female Tattoo Cats Corps. There are several other members of the Danzarb Corps, all of different ages and backgrounds. The story is quite dramatic, as characters will regularly die, or betray you, over the course of the game. There is no overworld, so you go from stage to stage, fighting through each dungeon, and then returning to base to rest. There are no shops, but you do obtain energy by winning battles, which is then used to create new items and equipment.

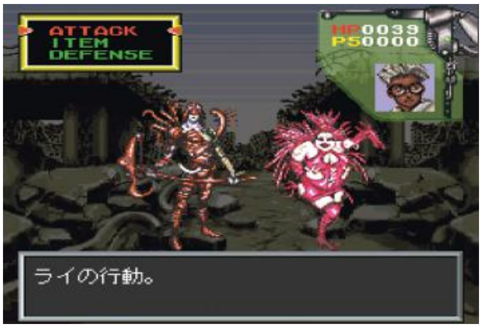
Battles occur either on foot or while piloting dragon-shaped mechas called Monoloids. Each fight, displayed in a first-person view, runs in pseudo-real-time, but moves quickly and provides little feedback, so it's difficult to grasp what's going on. Indeed, the game is much more interesting in concept than practice, as battles and exploration are rough. Still, as far as stories go, it's pretty well done, and the end-game twist (think: virtual reality) is unlike anything else of its period.

SUPER FAMICOM
yutaka

***Danzarb* feels like a TV anime, which makes sense, considering there were plans to make one.**

Maten Densetsu: Senritsu no Ooparts

Developer: Thinking Rabbit | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC



In *Maten Densetsu: Senritsu no Ooparts* ("Legend of Maten: Terrifying Ooparts"), the island of Japan has been launched into the sky for unknown reasons. The landscape is obviously devastated, resembling a post-apocalyptic setting, complete with mysterious demons. Plus, archaeological sites from all over the globe have mysteriously appeared. You control a hero (and a heroine), prophesied to be the only ones who can solve this crisis and save what's left of Japan.

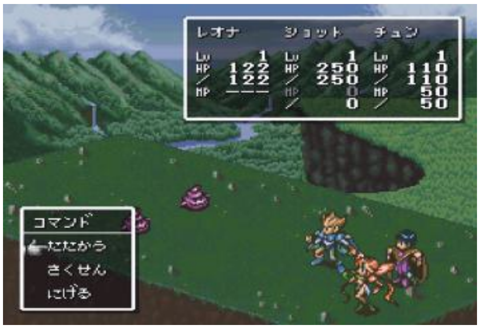
This game is pretty obviously a *Shin Megami Tensei* rip-off – the overhead map screen is almost identical, many areas are first-person dungeons, it has the same gritty, cyberpunk feel, it begins with a dream sequence during which you customise your character, and there are plenty of weird enemies that can join your team (though there's no demon conversation). It's also a mishmash of other themes based on the occult – "Ooparts" means "out of place artefacts" – and includes odd foes like youkai and dinosaurs. As a late-release SFC title, it's more visually ambitious, including more detailed sprites and full-screen dungeon displays. It also has the benefit of some fantastic character artwork by Katsuya Terada and enemy design by Yasushi Nirasawa (*Kamen Rider*).

It has an interesting upgrade system too. There is no levelling or shops; instead defeated enemies give you Energy. This has a variety of uses: enhancing your stats, creating items, or crafting equipment. The downside is that there are no inns either, so you need to constantly make restoratives. Plus, the story itself is rather shallow, lacking the depth of the series that obviously inspired it.

***Maten Densetsu* is obviously a *Shin Megami Tensei* rip-off, but it has the style down pat.**

Chou Mahou Tairiku Wozz

Developer: Hudson/Media Works | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC



The land of Wozz has been suffering, thanks to the evil demon Balam. Warriors from the human world are called to help take on this menace … except instead of the heralded heroes, they are three kids from across the globe. These are Reona, a genius Japanese inventor girl who also wields bazookas; Shot, an American archery expert; and Chun, a Chinese esper. Luckily, these kids are super-strong and smart, so they happily take up arms in this fantasy world. You can pick and name one of the three as the main character, though the rest still accompany you throughout the journey, with a fourth party slot taken up by a series of assorted characters.

Chou Mahou Tairiku Wozz ("The Super Magical Land of Wozz") was planned by the magazine *Game On!*, which solicited reader input, and includes package art by Manavu Kashimoto (*Croket!*). In practice, it's a fairly typical Super Famicom RPG that borrows from other games of its era – the battle scenes in particular feature an isometric perspective, in the *Breath of Fire* style. Its main innovation lies in a crafting system whereby you can disassemble and create an assortment of items, weapons, robots, and vehicles, providing you have the right items and know how to combine them.

For a late SFC RPG, everything about it feels a little bit thin. Outside of a few cool boss sprites, the graphics are middling, and while the music isn't bad, the soundtrack is sparse – there's not even a boss theme. Much of the game drags, and the story isn't really all that interesting until the end. An average game, for the most part, with a few decent aspects.

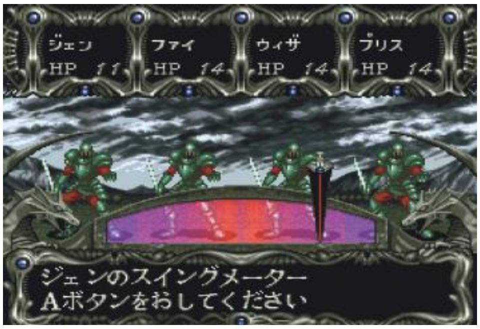
Japanese game magazines occasionally solicited reader concepts for games, something which would've been cool to see elsewhere around the globe.

Dark Kingdom

Developer: Telenet | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SFC

The protagonist of *Dark Kingdom* is a man named Jen Dolemon, whose family was killed by an invading demon army. He figures that the best way to exact vengeance is actually to enlist in that demon army, and thereby find the clan that killed his loved ones. So, he must ingratiate himself with a ruling class that views humans as subcreatures, while fighting alongside other traitorous humans. Most of the game involves running specific missions for the demons, and you get only a limited number of in-game days to accomplish these. There's more than enough time to complete these, but there are also many optional quests to undertake. As you rise through the ranks, eventually you become stronger and can hire stronger demons to join you in combat.

This is an excellent concept, but it's also made by Telenet, a company with a habit of squandering them. The main points of contention are the sluggish battle system and questionable balance. Every time a character performs a physical attack, you're shown a power gauge with an indicator that swings back and forth. You need to hit it at the right spot, or else it won't do much damage. It's a predecessor to the timing-based systems found in later games like *Paper Mario*, but it's really frustrating here, and coupled with the slow text speed, really drags down the pacing.



ジェンのスイングメーター
Aボタンをおしてください

Also, there's one point where you come across a band of stereotypical RPG good guys. Your mission is to defeat the hero, and you achieve success ... but he ends up able to resurrect himself by paying out half his gold. It's a hilarious fourth-wall-breaking JRPG joke ... but it also kinda ruins the game's otherwise dark and sardonic tone.

Dark Kingdom
ダークキングダム

***Dark Kingdom* is another "be the bad guy!" RPG, taking after Westone's *Dark Half*, though it's a little more traditional.**

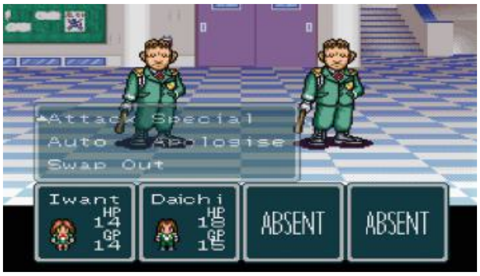
Hourai Gakuen no Bouken!

Developer: Office Dynamite | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SFC

One of the more unlikely properties to receive a JRPG adaptation was *Hourai Gakuen no Bouken!*, a play-by-mail RPG by publisher Youentai. Players would register to receive a copy of the game's handbook, as well as a "student ID", and then submit their monthly turn as free text. Eventually the medium became unfeasible, but *Hourai* proved popular enough to receive a Super Famicom adaptation.

Our protagonist is a transfer student flying to the prestigious Hourai High, a "mammoth school" micro-nation on perilous Utsuho Island. When the pilots take a nap and accidentally fly to Alaska, the hero asks the flight attendant if there's any way to make it to school on time. Annoyed, the flight attendant hands them a parachute and pushes them out of the emergency exit. The protagonist makes it just in time, but grievously injures the editor of *Hospo*, the school tabloid, while crash-landing. The protagonist is thus guilted into joining, and the *Hospo* crew head out in search of scandal, all set to a funky synth bass soundtrack from Hitoshi Sakimoto.

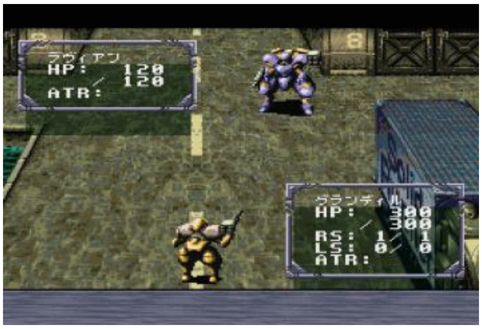
Hourai is essentially a *Dragon Quest* homage with a cute, yet half-baked take on *Final Fantasy V*'s job system. Each character can join up to three extracurricular clubs at a time to gain skills and buffs, but none of them are game-changers. The game's also notoriously buggy; in-battle coding reverts characters to their pre-equipment stats, rendering all weapons and armour useless! What really makes *Hourai* stand out is its offbeat sense of humour; our motley newspaper club will challenge the fascist Disciplinary Patrol Squad, the rogue AI ruling the girls' dormitory, and the Twilight Penguins criminal syndicate, among many other goofy threats. *Hourai* might not be the deepest RPG, but its irreverent charm is deserving of notability.



Though quite buggy, this is another wacky RPG that's a fun alternative to *EarthBound*.

Solid Runner

Developer: Sting | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC



ASCII
SOLID RUNNER

A late Super Famicom title, *Solid Runner* takes place in the futuristic Solid City, which is overrun with crime. The hero is Shuu, a detective who's engaged to a woman named Eileen. But she is murdered in cold blood, leaving Shuu to delve into the underground gangs of the city in search of revenge. He's joined by a girl, Ion, although she supplies support rather than fighting alongside him.

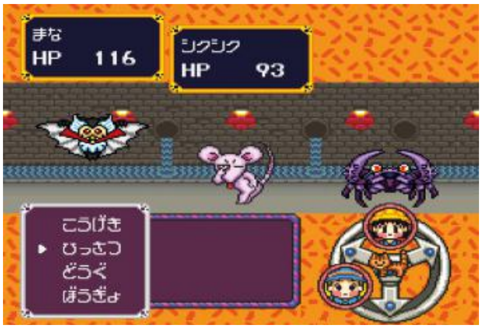
Most of the game involves taking on investigative missions, killing some bad guys, and then collecting a reward. Once you actually get into the action, you climb aboard your mecha and search the area. All of the battles are one-on-one, and while they're turn-based, there are no menus. Each button on the controller corresponds to one of your four equipped weapons, which range from machine guns through rocket launchers to mêlée weapons. With the exception of mêlée weapons, each weapon needs to be reloaded after firing, requiring that you waste a turn to prep your selected weapon. You can also dodge while attacking, which lowers your accuracy but increases your agility. Holding down the L button will activate the Boost command, strengthening your mecha's power for a moment, although doing this too many times will overload it.

While all of this gets pretty tedious, due to the high random encounter rate, the game is a nice change from the norm. It draws from a lot of different sources, like *Front Mission*, *Blade Runner*, and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and the cyberpunk locale helps set it apart from other SFC RPGs. All of those aspects help cover for the fact that it's kind of short and easy, with a story that's ultimately undercooked.

It may be style over substance, but cyberpunk mecha RPGs are uncommon enough to make this worthwhile.

Gokinjo Boukentai

Developer: ITL | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SFC



ごきんじょ冒険隊
PIONEER

Gokinjo Boukentai ("Neighborhood Adventure Squad") stars a five-year-old girl named Mana, who can talk to youkai. During the week, you attend school, but when Sunday hits, you adventure around town with your cat Yuzu (who also acts as a narrator), and receives missions from "god" to clean up some of the evil demons around town.

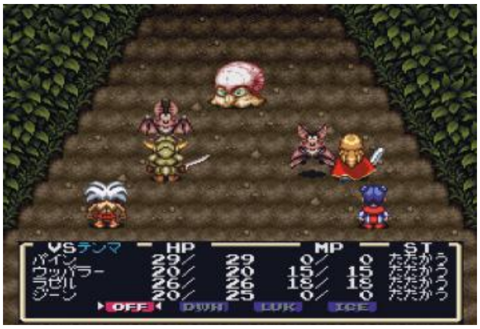
Battles are like those in *Dragon Quest*, with some tweaks – enemies are visible on the map, and there is no MP, as special attacks consume HP, but you regain full health after fights. Even if Mana is wiped out, you can retry battles and are granted a small stat boost. There is also a Persuade command whereby enemies may leave you alone and give you items instead. There are no experience levels, and stats are increased by attending school classes, which also determines which schoolmates you can adventure with and which missions pop up. The town is filled with quirky folks, and there are lots of humourous messages for the things you investigate, giving a level of detail uncommon in RPGs.

The game really does feel like you're a kid on magical adventures around town with your imaginary friends. It's compared a lot to *EarthBound*, in its tone as well its silliness, particularly the way your angry mother will retrieve her children after chapters are cleared, smashing through walls, interrupting a battle in mid-air, or crashing the party riding on a boat. The visuals, by manga artist Masumi Sudou, are whimsical and the soundtrack by Akihiko Mori, filled with jazzy battle themes, is impressive. Due to the late-1996 release and a small print run, it's a cult classic even in Japan, but it's relentlessly charming.

View neighbourhood life through the eyes of a young girl in this relentlessly adorable little game.

Elfaria

Developer: Hudson/Red Entertainment | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SFC



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VSテンマ   HP         MP      ST
パイン     29/  29    0/  0  たたかう
ウッパラー 20/  20   15/ 15  たたかう
ラゼル     26/  26   18/ 18  たたかう
ジーン     20/  25    0/  0  たたかう
     ▸OFF◂    DWN    LUK    ICE
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Artist Susumu Matsushita also provided character designs for the Capcom 3D action game *Maximo.*

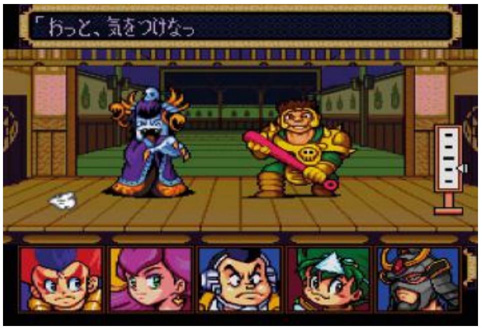
In *Elfaria*, you control four squadrons as they besiege towns captured by monsters in order to free them. However, unusually for an RPG, you don't get experience or gold from battles. Instead, defeated foes drop various items, which you can then equip using the Meld system. Each character has five slots, and you can stick whatever items you want in there, boosting your stats or providing various effects. So you can meld five swords to a character and max out their offensive capability, but leave them defensively weak. Each squad is associated with one of four elements, and is thus better at dealing with certain types of foes. Individually, each party consists of two fighters, a magician, and a healer monk. Battles are fought automatically, as you have minimal input on how they attack. The only way to actually gain levels is by defeating boss monsters, driving them out of town; however, they can retake villages if you're not careful.

In theory, although the Meld system encourages grinding smarter rather than harder, you'll still end up fighting a whole lot, since the items are randomly dropped, and hoping that the AI managing your party reacts quickly enough to keep them alive. You do, technically, get slightly stronger as you continue to fight, though.

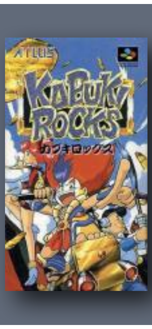
The character designs are by Susumu Matsushita (*Famitsu* magazine, *Adventure Island*) with music by Shigeaki Saegusa (who has scored anime films as well as operas). As usual, it's interesting for its innovations, but too tedious to play, especially given its sparse story. The sequel adds in an experience system and changes up the Meld system a bit.

Kabuki Rocks

Developer: Atlus/Red Entertainment | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SFC



「おっと、気をつけなっ



The stage musical concept of *Kabuki Rocks* is cool, but the game doesn't do anything interesting with it.

In RPG terms, Atlus was mostly known for its *Shin Megami Tensei* series, but it diverted itself briefly with *Kabuki Rocks*, a joint venture with production company Red Entertainment. Incidentally, this game also has some similarities to Red's other major RPG series, the PC Engine CD *Tengai Makyou* games, which take place in a comical version of feudal Japan and feature characters based on Japanese mythology and history. As a kabuki (traditional Japanese theatre) actor named Sukeroku "Rock" Hanakawado, you must travel around Japan and wipe out monsters.

It's a pretty typical JRPG in most ways, though battles are presented as taking place on a stage. All of the magic spells are musical, most being parodies of real-life songs, mostly Japanese but some international ones as well – "Frozen it Be" riffing on the Beatles' "Let It Be", "Ladybug Thunder" playing off of Cherish's "Ladybug Samba", and so forth. You learn new ones by singing karaoke at each town. Each character also has a unique "Juuhachiban", a kabuki term for someone's particular talent. There's also an audience reaction gauge on the side of the battle stage, which will increase under certain conditions. If your battle performance is good enough, you'll get bonuses when you win. Overall, it's an average RPG, despite the unique premise.

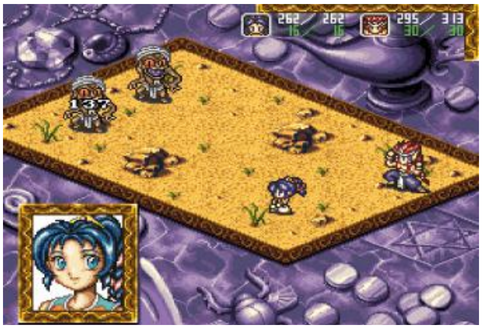
Kabuki Rocks is also the name of a Japanese rock band that was popular at the time. They have cameos, but otherwise didn't have much to do with it. They provided some tunes, but most of the soundtrack is by Tsukasa Masuko, the composer on the early *Megami Tensei* games, who has a similar style.

Arabian Nights

Developer: Pandora Box | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SFC

Arabian Nights: Sabaku no Seireiou ("Desert Spirit King") stars an orphan girl named Shukran who discovers a magical ring, which holds the spirit of the djinni Ifrit. With her one wish, she asks for world peace, but such things are not simple, so the duo begin an adventure together to find the crystals that will replenish Ifrit's lost power, and make that dream a reality. The game was developed by Pandora Box, which also created the many games in the *ONI* series.

Battles are fought from an isometric perspective, à la *Breath of Fire*. In addition to magic, you also have consumable Barrier Cards – when these are played, they appear on the battlefield, and provide effects such as granting elemental attacks, guaranteeing critical attacks, or doubling magic spells. Enemies can use these too, so you have to be careful. Only one card can be in play at a time, with different ranks assigned to them to determine which gets priority. There are three playable characters – Shukran, Ifrit, and a thief boy named Hearty – and there are several other djinns you meet as well, many of whom have had various past entanglements with Ifrit.



The random encounter rate is pretty high, and the balance is pretty wonky. But darned if *Arabian Nights* isn't a cool game anyway. RPGs that take place in the Middle East are fairly uncommon (save for SEGA's *Oasis* games) as are ones that feature a female protagonist. The visuals are attractive, and the music is decent too (the manual provides the lyrics for the overworld theme). There are also branching paths and endings depending on your choices. Design issues aside, it's a rather charming title.

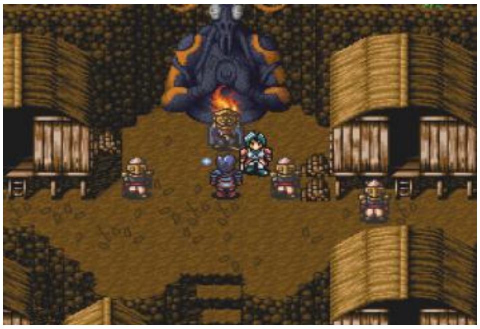
Given the late release of this SFC RPG, the attractive character art and interesting setting weren't quite enough to make this game a success.

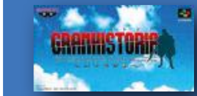
Gran Historia

Developer: J-Force | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC

In *Gran Historia: Genshi Sekaiki* ("Vision of World Record"), the people of the continent of Gran worship one of two gods – Za, the god of machinery, or Ge, the god of nature and spirits. They have long coexisted, though eventually one will gain too much power, and destroy the entire land. You control a travelling spirit from another reality, with knowledge of the world's history, and the ability to change the past to prevent the ruination of the future.

At the beginning, you witness the murder of a man named Thor, by bandits, on the night of his wedding. The travelling spirit (named by the player) inhabits his body, but tragically, he's killed again the next morning. So the spirit uses its abilities to rewind time back to the day before, where Thor is able to stop the bandit, rewriting that part of history. The story continues like this, and you eventually make your way up to the kingship, only to be tossed out into another body by a mysterious figure. It's an excellent plot, though the story is fairly linear, and other than a few choices, you don't have much direct input into the story.



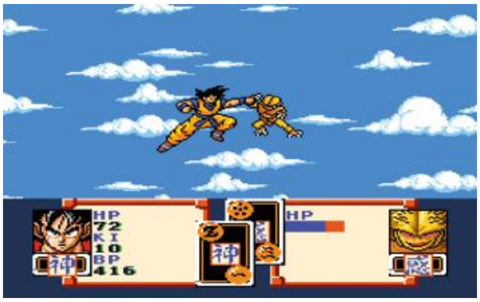


As an RPG, it's also a little dull. Battles are first-person, and the party is surrounded on four sides by attacking foes. But the game doesn't do anything interesting with this concept; it just makes the battles take too long. The player can wield two types of magic though, one for each god, and these consume different resources. The random encounter rate is a pain too, though the story almost makes up for it. The basic concept of the game seems to have inspired Atlus' 2010 game *Radiant Historia.*

***Chrono Trigger* may be the most popular JRPG focusing on time travel, but it's certainly not the only one.**

Dragon Ball Z: Super Saiya Densetsu

Developer: TOSE/Bandai | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): SFC



SUPER Famicom
DRAGON BALL Z

This is one of the better *Dragon Ball Z* RPGs, though *Attack of the Saiyans* for the DS is also a quality game.

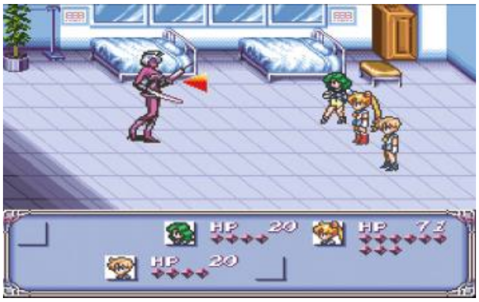
Akira Toriyama’s *Dragon Ball* (and its fighting-focused continuation, *Dragon Ball Z*) was one of the most popular manga/anime properties during the late ’80s and much of the ’90s, so of course it became the basis for tons of video games. The third Famicom game, *Dragon Ball 3: Gokuden,* started a line of titles that incorporated some RPG elements. In it, characters move around like board game pieces, and fights take place via a battle system using cards. This was used as the basis for two *Dragon Ball Z* Famicom games, *Kyoushuu! Saiyan* and *Gekishin Frieza,* based on the Vegeta, Namek, and Frieza arcs. These were then condensed and revised for the Super Famicom game, *Dragon Ball Z: Super Saiya Densetsu.*

Exploration is handled as in a regular JRPG, though you can also fly. Battles still use the card-based system from previous games. Five cards are randomly generated, each of which has an offence and defence rating, as well as a colour that indicates the type of attack. Once all actions are chosen, the fights are then played out, using a mixture of 2D sprites and cinematic cut-ins. Being an early Super Famicom title, the field graphics are incredibly simple, but the animation in these fight scenes is actually reasonably decent, considering the period. Characters gain power levels as they fight, too. The canon storyline, in which several characters die, is not compulsory, so you can choose to avoid any other deaths – all but one, necessary so Goku can go Super Saiyan, anyway.

The series continued with a third *DBZ* game on the Famicom, *Ressen Jinzouningen,* as well as *Saiyajin Zetsumetsu Keikaku,* one of the few games to have a story not based on the anime/manga.

Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon: Another Story

Developer: Angel | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC



Some of the other *Sailor Moon* Super Famicom games were pretty decent too, including two beat-’em-ups and a versus fighting game.

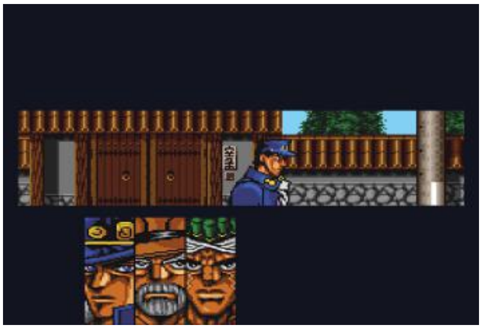
Sailor Moon: Another Story is basically the classic magical girl show by way of *Final Fantasy.* It’s (original) story takes place between the third and fourth shows of the television season – the sorceress Apsu of the evil organisation Hell Destiny, living in the 30th century in Crystal Tokyo, has sent a team called the Opposite Guardians into the past to alter it to suit her. This squad consists of five members, mirror images of those in the main Sailor Scout team, who cause trouble by reviving past opponents or causing reformed characters to go bad. The story was provided by original manga artist Naoko Takeuchi, who also designed several new characters, so there’s some remarkable authenticity.

Visually, it looks like a Square SFC RPG, though with taller sprites, and each major character has a portrait. There are voice effects for all of the main fighters, and several familiar music themes are featured The battles scene are also presented from a side-view perspective, à la *Final Fantasy,* though it features a more traditional turn-based battle system. Up to five characters can fight at once (with a total of ten Scouts available); in addition to physical and special moves, there are also combination moves like *Chrono Trigger*’s Double and Triple Techs, plus you can change the formation of your team to emphasise offence or defence among various members. There’s also a sub-quest involving finding puzzle pieces, which will reward you near the end of the game.

The damage calculations and difficulty balance are a little off, but otherwise the strong visuals and original story make this essential for *Sailor Moon* fans, and it certainly serves as a high-water mark for manga/anime RPG adaptations.

JoJo no Fushigina Bouken

Developer: WinkySoft | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SFC



JoJo's Bizarre Adventure focuses on the Joestar family as it battles evil across the generations. The third story arc is the most popular, as it introduced a concept called Stands, or physical manifestations of a person's spirit that enable super-powers; these are a lot like the Personas in Atlus' RPG series. While nowadays the series is known for fighting games, the first video game adaptation was a Super Famicom RPG.

The presentation is fairly unique – most of the action is presented in letterbox format, taking up about quarter of the screen. Only the head and upper torso of each character are visible, and only left/right movement is possible; they change areas by walking through doors. The cinematic display looks extremely cool at first, but ends up being extremely cumbersome, as it's difficult to navigate and interact with things. Battle scenes switch perspectives, focusing on the enemies or the characters, though again, the view is rather tiny.

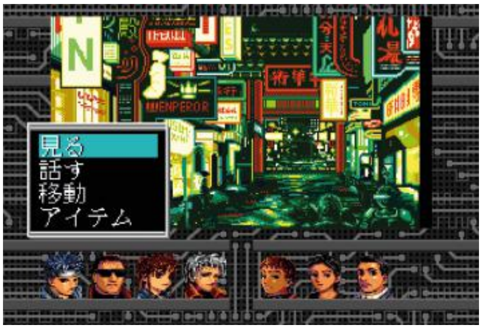
There's a biorhythm system in place, in which mental, physical, and Fate conditions fluctuate as you move around. Characters can also get stressed, weakening their abilities, but this is resolved by smoking cigarettes or using the bathroom. You have standard HP and MP stats, but when a character's MP depletes completely, they lose the will to fight, and require encouragement from allies to recover. At the beginning of each fight, you can also pick a card to get one of the various boosts.

While the story is based on the manga, it's quite strange, especially as vampiric nemesis Dio actually ends up helping you out by telling you your next destination. The story is also quite short, though it's still worth it for *JoJo* fans.

The cinematic presentation of this SFC game makes it worth checking out for that alone.

Shadowrun

Developer: Compile | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): MCD



MEGA-CD
SHADOWRUN

Shadowrun is a popular tabletop RPG that takes place in a cyberpunk future, where science and magic co-exist, and humans live with typical fantasy races like elves and dwarves. There were three completely different *Shadowrun* RPGs released during the 16-bit era – the SNES game by Australia-based Beam Software, the Genesis game by US-based BlueSky, and a Japan-only Mega CD game by Compile. This last is the closest in form to a JRPG, though it plays a little differently from most.

The story is based on the *Shadowrun Replay* books released in Japan, taking place in Tokyo in the year 2053. The game is divided into chapters, starring the blue haired "street samurai" Rokudo, accompanied by ex-company man Shiun, the female shaman Mao, and the elven mercenary (called a Decker in *Shadowrun* lingo) D-Head. Part of each chapter is a command-based adventure game, à la *Snatcher*, in which you investigate the case you've taken on. For dungeon crawling and combat, the game switches to a JRPG-style overhead view.

There are no random battles, all encounters being preset. When fights begin, the area is divided into a grid, and you can move around to attack up-close with mêlée weapons or at a distance with guns or magic. Characters have two meters, health and mental, which are affected differently by different types of attack. In order to give the game more of a tabletop role-playing feel, every time someone attacks or defends, dice are shown rolling at the top of the screen. They stop at the press of a button, which then determines the strength of the attack, if it hits at all. Overall, it's not bad, though obviously difficult for non-Japanese readers.

This release of *Shadowrun* is unique, considering it's a Japanese take on an American property, which was never brought back to the country where it originated.

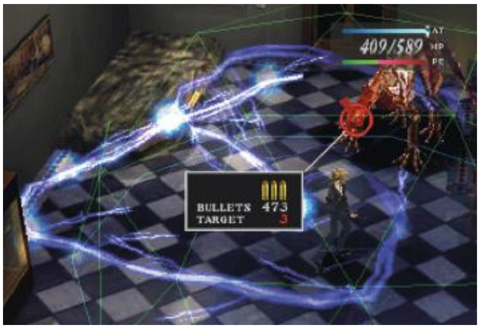
Parasite Eve

Developer: Square | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1

With *Final Fantasy VII*, Square began embracing movie-like elements. In the interim between the seventh and eight entries in the series, they released *Parasite Eve*, which terms itself "The Cinematic RPG". While the game was largely designed in Japan, it was a co-production with Square's American studios, which were set up to handle much of its computer animation output. It was (extremely) loosely based on a 1995 science fiction novel by Hideaki Sena, which also got its own live-action film adaptation in 1997, both of which are available in English.

While few people probably remember what "mitochondria" are, beyond hazy memories of biology class, the story of *Parasite Eve* imagines that these little components of the cell overtake the rest of it. Functionally, this is just a justification for lots of crazy psychic powers and grotesque mutations. The story begins with Aya Brea, a New York City cop, attending an opera at Carnegie Hall, at which one of the singers goes crazy, and nearly everyone bursts into flames. Aya is unharmed, for reasons that will eventually become clear, and she hunts down this singer, who terms herself "Eve", and has caused the city to become overrun with monsters.

Parasite Eve desperately wants to be a Hollywood movie, so it's paced like one. Across its two CDs, playing through the game takes maybe seven hours. The script is terse, so while it's brisk, it's also all spectacle, and extremely linear – the game is basically divided into levels, as you explore NYC's underground, Central Park, the Museum of Natural History, and eventually end up in a climactic fight on an aircraft carrier. There are plenty of CG cutscenes, though still no voice acting.



PlayStation
Parasite Eve
SQUARESOFT

Being able to play a movie was a big selling point during the '90s, a promise made (and largely kept) by *Parasite Eve*.

Battles occur randomly on the field; the screen pulses and enemies appear. Here, you directly control Aya as she runs around the area, dodging enemy fire until her AT meter fills up, at which point you can attack by firing her gun, or using her own developing mitochrondrial powers (basically, magic). It's not exactly exciting, though – combined with limited customisation, which mostly just amounts to tweaks on your guns, it feels like *Parasite Eve* is only an RPG because Square didn't want to alienate its *Final Fantasy* audience. Indeed, its sequel went a more action-based route and more closely resembles *Resident Evil*, while the finale in the trilogy, *The Third Birthday* for the PSP, is a straight-up 3D run-and-gun with a body swapping gimmick, and is only connected through the presence of Aya.

The CG was obviously hot for the time, and while it's dated now, it's still relatively decent. The game still succeeds, due to its moody portrayal of late '90s New York City, in turn largely thanks to its electronically-oriented soundtrack from Yoko Shimomura. The *Final Fantasy VI*-esque synthesised choir warblings are a bit odd, but the rest alternates between atmospheric tones and techno battle themes, and keeps the game interesting.

Vagrant Story

Developer: Square | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS1

Yasumi Matsuno made a name for himself as the designer of strategy classics like *Ogre Battle, Tactics Ogre*, and *Final Fantasy Tactics*, but his dungeon crawler *Vagrant Story* is probably his most unusual title. It features Ashley Riot, a member of an elite squadron called Riskbreakers, as he infiltrates the decaying city of Leá Monde to take down a seemingly immortal cult leader by the name of Sydney Losstarot.

Square was hugely into cinematic titles, given the success of *Final Fantasy VII*, but *Vagrant Story* takes a different approach – there is only one CG animation, right at the beginning, and the rest of the game is rendered in polygons. It's obviously pushing the PlayStation to the limit of its abilities, and it's absolutely incredible even now. It even beats *Metal Gear Solid,* because it has actual facial features, complete with moving lips (though no voice acting), and its cutscene direction is even more stunning. The sprawling city of Leá Monde, based on an actual French town, is just as much of a character as any human, consisting of sprawling catacombs and long-abandoned dwellings.

The mechanics are a far cry from the usual hack-and-slashery. When you command Ashley to attack, the action pauses and he's surrounded by a wireframe sphere, indicating his attack range. You can target individual enemy body parts, and the level of debilitation inflicted depends on what you hit. Further, if you time your button presses in the correct rhythms, you can chain together combos with even more substantial effects. As you rack up a combo chain, an indicator called Risk fills up; the higher it gets, the more your defence falls, so if you miss a button tap and allow an enemy to counterattack, its blow may severely injure you, if not kill you outright.

HP 999·999
MP 999·999
RISK ZERO

It wouldn't be a Matsuno game if there weren't some kind of overly complex mechanics, and here this is manifested as a weapon crafting system. Each has an affinity based on one of six enemy classes (Human, Beast, etc.), seven elements (Earth, Fire, etc.) and three blade types (Blunt, Edged, and Piercing). However, many enemies have strong defences, meaning you should craft and carry around at least a few different weapons and switch them as the situation dictates. There's no way to quick-switch them though, only slow menus.

Despite the beautiful graphics, much of the journey is spent in dull brown rooms, and while the game is only about 20 hours long, it feels like it could be cut down by half. And the amount of weapon crafting required will either enthrall people or put them off entirely. But the atmosphere is unparalleled, thanks not only to the craftsmanship, but also Hitoshi Sakimoto's beautifully moody score, and the English script is one of the most sharply-written of any Japanese RPG. It's a unique game, which divides opinion, but if it clicks for you, then it might be one of the best you'll ever play.

PlayStation
VAGRANT STORY
JOURNEYSOFT

***Vagrant Story* is definitely not for everyone, but if it clicks, it will click hard.**

Thousand Arms

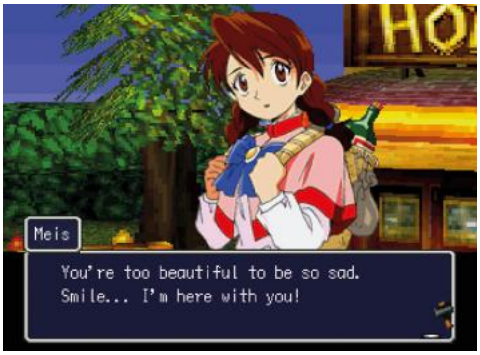
Developer: Red/Atlus | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1

Meis Triumph is a 16 year boy who really likes the ladies. Which is appropriate, because he's a Spirit Blacksmith, a profession that uses the affection of women to help temper and improve swords. At the beginning of the game, Meis is kicked out of his home by attackers, and must strengthen his skills so he can fight back against the evil Dark Acolytes. The game has bright, anime-style visuals, along with a cool fantasy/steampunk aesthetic, where magic and machinery co-exist.

Thousand Arms has a lot of talent behind it – it was published by Atlus, creators of the *Shin Megami Tensei* series, and produced by Red Entertainment, where it was overseen by Ouji Hiroi, creator of the *Sakura Wars* and *Tengai Makyou* series. The character art was provided by Yuuya Kusaka (*Sorcerous Stabber Orphen*) and the initial concept was by Takehiko Itou (*Outlaw Star*). They even got white-hot J-pop sensation Ayumi Hamasaki to provide two vocal tracks. Unfortunately, none of this matters very much in the end, because the game just isn't very good.

The premise is basically a dating RPG, sort of like *Sakura Wars* but in the mould of a more traditional JRPG. The problem is that both elements are executed very poorly. Up to three characters can appear in combat, but only one of them, positioned in the front row, can actually attack, while the others sit in the back row and can use items and provide other support. There's also a real-time element, whereby you select a move, then wait a few seconds before you can actually execute it. It's needlessly slow, brainless, and not much fun at all.

As for the dating elements, there are several different girls that come along for the journey, and you can take them around various towns to have dates with them. However, these just revolve around answering simple dialogue questions; their intimacy level increases or decreases based on your answers, and that affection is used to enhance your weapons. There are gifts you can give them, plus various mini-games you can play, depending on your partner. While some of the girls are amusing, this whole system is too shallow to feel like it's worth much.



Meis

You're too beautiful to be so sad.
Smile... I'm here with you!

PlayStation
THOUSAND ARMS
ATLUS

Thousand Arms sold itself on its harem of lovely ladies and its dating elements, which are sadly under-utilised.

The game does have a goofy sense of humour. The NPC dialogue in particular sparkles, often making subtly dirty jokes or breaking the fourth wall. They're the sort of lines that you'd find in a Working Designs translation, but they feel more appropriate here, in a game that really wasn't meant to be taken seriously.

There is a certain novelty behind *Thousand Arms* that keeps it from being unplayable, mostly because, at this point, outside of the carnival event in *Final Fantasy VII*, English-speaking gamers weren't really familiar with the concept of "dating" in a video game. But that's also not enough to make the game good, and the concept didn't really take off among the English-speaking community until Atlus' own *Persona 3* several years later.

The Legend of Dragoon

Developer: Sony Computer Entertainment | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1

After witnessing the extraordinary financial success of the *Final Fantasy* series on the PlayStation, Sony decided to try making an RPG themselves, which resulted in *The Legend of Dragoon*, released in 1999. It is very much in the vein of Square's series – it's a multi-CD epic with pre-rendered backgrounds, polygonal characters, and plenty of FMV.

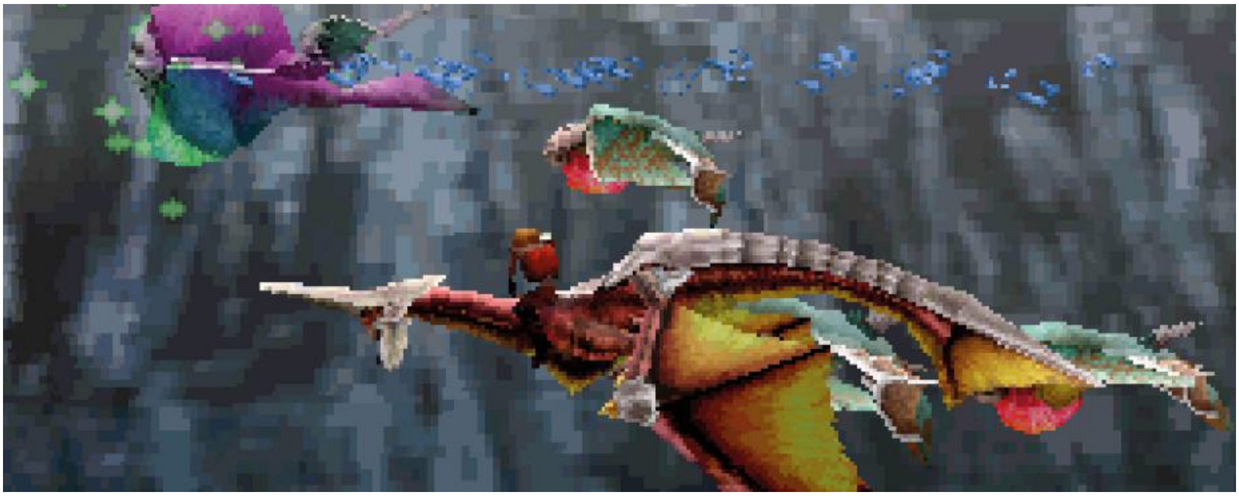
The hero is a young man named Dart, who's returned from a journey to find his hometown in ruins, and his childhood friend Shana kidnapped. He rescues her, but during their escape, she reveals herself to have a mysterious power, which makes her desired by her enemies. Dart himself eventually discovers how to transform into a super-powerful Dragoon, and works to save the land, and solve the mystery of his deceased parents. The story is typical RPG stuff, not quite up to the level of Square's 32-bit efforts, but not bad. Dart isn't exactly a memorable hero, but some of his companions are amusing, like the sharp-tongued warrior Rose, who helps Dart at the beginning, and doofy but likeable knight Lavitz Slambert. However, the translation quality is absolutely dreadful, often lending comedy when there really shouldn't be any.

Most games that are derivative of other, more popular titles tend to be rather low budget, but that's definitely not a problem with *The Legend of Dragoon*, because it's a pretty nice-looking game. The character models are a little rough, but better than in most other PS1 RPGs, while the world design and art style are well done. The FMVs are decent too, though some are wasted on fairly banal storytelling segments, while more important scenes are communicated by the in-game engine. There is a little bit of voice acting, but like the writing, it's pretty bad.

Alas, *The Legend of Dragoon*'s biggest failing is its battle system. It's a pretty standard turn-based affair, except you're supposed to time your sword swings with an indicator to score extra damage or block counterattacks, or mash buttons to enhance magic attacks. *Paper Mario* for the Nintendo 64, and later games like *Shadow Hearts* and *Lost Odyssey*, have something similar, but here it really slows down the pacing of an already sluggish battle system. Fights also take a long time, especially boss battles, and regular enemies barely give any experience points. You can defend, to restore a bit of health, but this action does little to absorb attacks, so you're likely to take as much damage as you reverse. The character customisation just involves switching between attack types, and the transformed Dragoon forms aren't all that exciting either.

The Legend of Dragoon was popular, especially in North America, most likely due to its strong marketing campaign – like *Final Fantasy VII's*, it mostly showed off the impressive CG animation. *Dragoon* has its fans, who have long been clamouring for a remake or sequel. But the pretty graphics and rather average story aren't enough to make up for the dreadful battles.

Sony tried to make their own *Final Fantasy* killer, and didn't quite succeed, but that hasn't stopped it from gaining a fanbase over the years.



Panzer Dragoon Saga

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): SAT

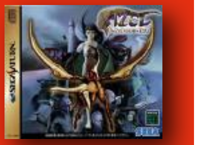
SEGA's *Panzer Dragoon* series was initially created to show off the 3D abilities of the 32-bit Saturn. While the first two titles were simple arcade-style rail shooters, they amazed gamers of the mid-'90s with a gorgeous game world, drawing equally from the likes of Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä* and the works of French artist Moebius. They're a strange mixture of fantastic organic creations and high-tech wizardry, the likes of which hasn't been duplicated in any other medium. In order to better explore that world, they created *Panzer Dragoon Saga*, a role-playing game.

The story focuses on Edge, a young mercenary, who discovers a girl from an ancient civilisation buried in a wall. He is then attacked by the rebellious Black Fleet, who steal the girl for their own. Edge manages to escape, but his fate and that of the girl, named Azel, are intertwined, and while initially opponents, they eventually team up to save the world.

The world-building is incredible, despite the shaky 3D capabilities of the Saturn. In the previous titles, the story was simply told through CG cutscenes, and the world existed only as a background to fly over. When you're interacting with the environments, walking through them or talking to their inhabitants, it shows how much effort was put into creating a completely unique setting and culture.

The battle system is also a radical departure from the norm. All battles are fought in mid-air, as you're flying on your dragon. The action takes place in real time, with three power bars that charge over a period of a few seconds. At any point, you can pause the battle and choose to attack – if you've built enough power, you can attack multiple times, or unleash a single, but more powerful, attack. Positioning is also extremely important – your dragon flies in one of four quadrants surrounding your enemies, and can move between them at will. Your radar, at the bottom of the screen, will mark which zones are safe and which are dangerous. If you're flying in a green zone, the enemy can't attack; if you're in a neutral zone, the enemy can use a weak attack; and naturally, the red zone indicates that the enemy can use a fierce attack. However, enemies often have weak points positioned to encourage you to fly in the face of danger to finish battles efficiently. The enemy's attack patterns often change multiple times during battle, forcing you to adapt and figure out the optimal positioning, timing, and type of attack to use. Furthermore, you have precise control over the development of your dragon, determining how fast it is, how powerful its attacks are, and other statistics.

Panzer Dragoon Saga is, however, remarkably short. Despite utilising four discs – mostly for pixellated, heavily compressed video that looks poor compared to that in PlayStation games – the quest clocks in at roughly 15 hours. But it's a totally unique game, with a world and combat system completely unlike any other game's.



***Panzer Dragoon Saga* is one of the most sought-after games on the Saturn, and gamers have long clamoured for a remake, so they don't have to shell out several hundred dollars to get it.**

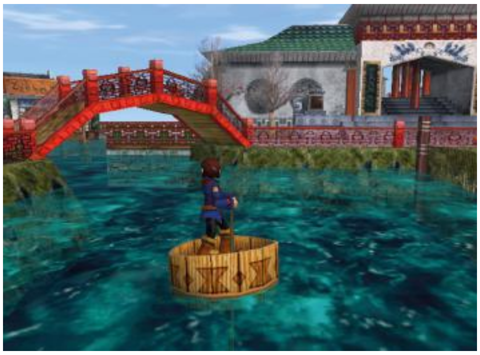
Skies of Arcadia

Developer: SEGA | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): DC, GC

In SEGA's *Skies of Arcadia*, you're the leader of a group of air pirates – explicitly "good-guy" pirates – travelling the world over, fighting all kinds of "bad-guy" pirates, and against evil empires, as well as helping anyone in need. The story initially focuses on Vyse and Aika, members of the Blue Rogues, who fight against the imperial Valuan Empire. They rescue a young woman named Fina, of the mostly-extinct Silver Civilization, on a quest to find the Moon Crystals and prevent them from falling into the hands of Valuans. Together, they set off into the skies to defend the world from evil.

The world of *Skies of Arcadia* is largely uncharted, at least for the Blue Rogues, and is comprised of dozens of islands floating in the skies, miles above the poison that lies on the surface. The explorer's map that shows your ship's position slowly expands from a tiny circle to a gigantic view of the entire world, keeping note of the myriad artefacts you discover. Additionally, there's an ongoing quest to draft more members into your ranks, which help out with various tasks on your ship.

Skies of Arcadia succeeds because there is no generic dungeon, no faceless town. Everything has individuality, from the secretive underground pirate's base, to the tree-clubhouse feeling of the jungle city of Horteka, to the gorgeous waterfalls and Asian-inspired shrines in Yafutoma, to the Middle Eastern desert lands of Nasrad. You don't even need to talk to the inhabitants to understand the cultures underpinning the game's nations – all you need to do is walk through their countries. Dungeons don't just seem like some landscape you're walking over – each and every one of them has depth and texture, the kind that you'd usually see in platform or action games. This is common nowadays, but considering the simple polygonal fields or pre-rendered screens of 32-bit games, this felt like the beginning of a new generation. In fact, this devotion to architecture is what gives *Skies of Arcadia* its unique identity.

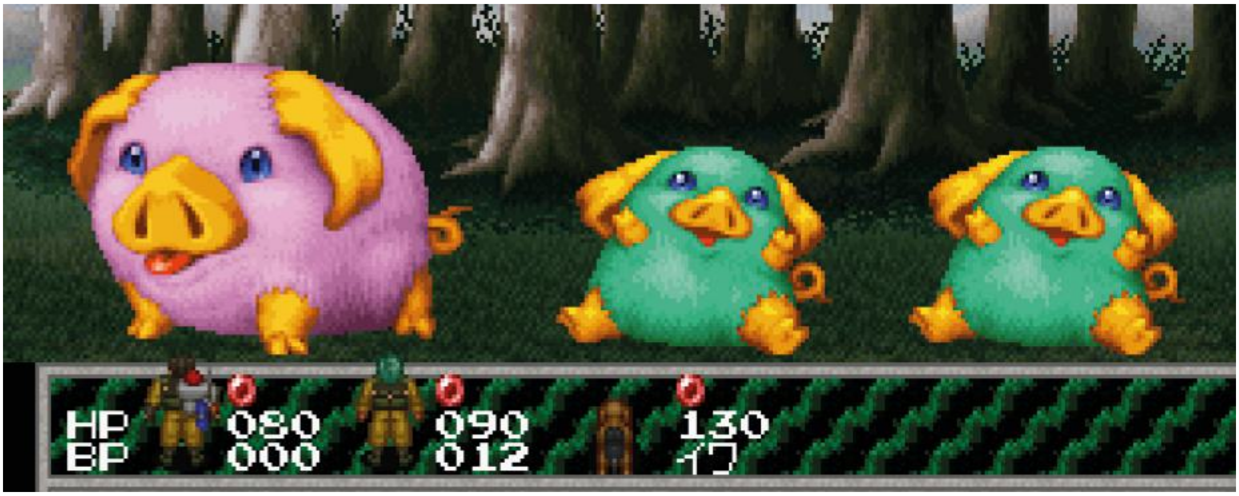


The rest of the game stumbles, due to some dull game design. The turn-based combat system is a bit plodding, with its gimmick being a super-energy bar shared amongst party members, allowing for special attacks. The constant random battles, especially in the original Dreamcast release, don't do it any favours either. There are airborne ship-to-ship battles in which you square off while flying through the air, though these are rather drawn out, as you just watch the vessels fly about and trade blows.

Ultimately, though, *Skies of Arcadia* has all of the straightforward charm of a 16-bit game wrapped up in modern trappings; it feels like the best Saturday morning cartoons never made. Beyond its initial Dreamcast release, it ended up on the GameCube as *Skies of Arcadia Legends,* with some small additions, though worse sound, but any other planned ports and sequels were cancelled. The heroes later make cameo appearances in the SEGA SRPG series *Valkyria Chronicles.*

Dreamcast
Skies of Arcadia

The "Arcadia" in *Skies of Arcadia* most likely refers to *Arcadia of My Youth,* a classic anime film by Leiji Matsumoto, starring space pirate Captain Harlock, who was the basis for Vyse in this game.



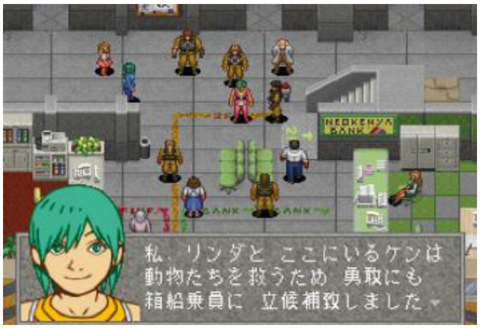
Linda^3

Developer: Alfa Systems | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): PCECD, PS1, SAT

After his work on the successful (albeit typical) *Tengai Makyou* series, writer Shoji Masuda created *Linda*^{3} (pronounced Linda Cube), which can be most easily described as a sci-fi Noah's Ark JRPG. It features artwork by Cannabis (a.k.a. Tatsuyuki Tanaka), best known for his illustration work on the *Akira* movie.

The game takes place on Neo-Kenya, an artificial planet with a climate similar to Earth's. While humanity has lived there peacefully for about a century, it's in the path of a meteorite, which is scheduled to demolish it in eight years. Unlike most stories that threaten total destruction, there's nothing you can do to prevent this cataclysm. However, a mysterious ark drops out of the sky, instructing Neo-Kenya's inhabitants to gather both humans and animals, herd them onto the ship, and then escape to the stars. You play as a ranger named Ken, tasked with exploring the colony, collecting wildlife, and loading them onto the ark, all before the deadline hits. It's also important to note that while Neo-Kenya is Earth-like, it is not Earth. So while its animals are based on familiar creatures like pigs, cows, and squirrels, they actually look more like their pastel, demonic counterparts. Combat is much as in *Dragon Quest*, displayed using a first-person view, though you have to be careful to just weaken foes rather than killing them, as that won't do you any good. In addition to registering them on the ark, they can be sold, turned into meat, or even be added to your party. As time passes in the game, humans begin to flee, and by the time the meteor is scheduled to hit, most of the cities will be deserted.

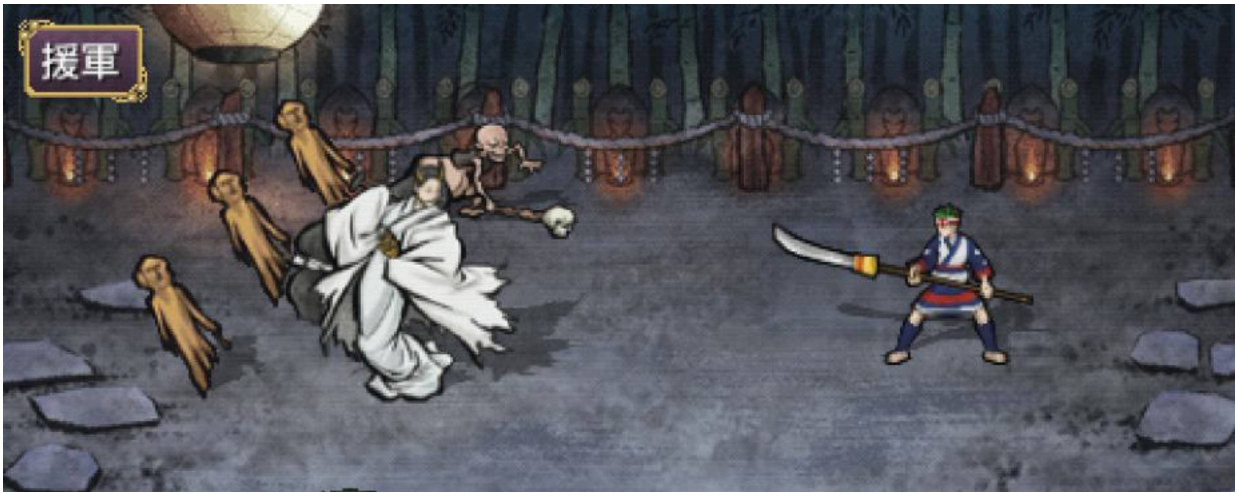
The title actually refers to the three scenarios, each exploring a different role for the titular Linda, whether childhood friend, lover, or wife. She's loud and abrasive, but ultimately loveable. She was included because the developers figured that no one bought PC Engine games unless there was a beautiful girl in them, but her role expanded as Masuda fell in love with the performance of voice actress Minami Takayama. Each functions as a parallel world, telling a different story, allowing you to explore different parts of the colony and giving different capturing requirements. The stories themselves are pretty wild – "Merry Xmas" features Ken's twin brother Nek, who wears a mask and dresses in a Santa Claus outfit, while "Happy Child" revolves around a mad scientist with a Hitler moustache and his creepy robotic daughter. The third scenario, "Astro Ark", doesn't have much of a story and is much more open-ended, with harsher requirements and a focus on combat and animal collection.


私、リンダと ここにいるケンは
動物たちを救うため 勇敢にも
箱船乗員に 立候補致しました

Linda3
SEGA SATURN

This game can easily be summarised as "Noah's Ark: The JRPG", but that also undersells how crazy it is.

Initially released on the PC Engine CD, it was later ported to 32-bit platforms, with enhanced visuals, animated cutscenes, and assorted balance tweaks. However, some of the more violent scenes had to be toned down for the PlayStation version, while the Saturn version keeps most of this intact. These also have a fourth, unlockable scenario, which is basically a super-difficult mode.

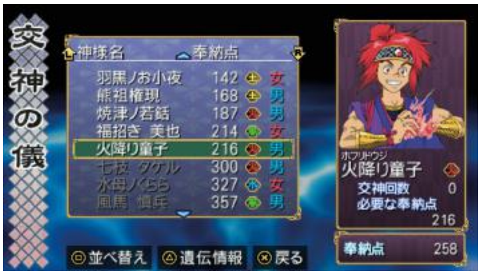


Ore no Shikabane o Koete Yuke (series)

Developer: Alfa Systems | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1, PSP, PSV

After creating the eccentric *Linda³,* Shoji Masuda went on to develop *Ore no Shikabane o Koete Yuke* ("Cross Over My Corpse"), another rather unusual RPG. Taking place during the Japanese Heian era, the premise here is that the protagonist's family has been cursed by demons with two unique problems: their offspring are born fully grown and have a maximum life of span of about two years, and they cannot procreate with humans. The gods, feeling pity for your clan, promise to perpetuate your bloodline by offering their mating services to you. However, they won't couple with just anyone. So you begin a cycle where you send your warriors into various randomly-generated dungeons to do battle, increasing their spirit power. Their short lifespans mean that they quickly grow weak and die, so that spirit power is used to allow them to mate with strong gods, creating offspring with stats and abilities inherited from their parents. This continues until you've built up a strong enough clan to take vengeance on those who cursed you to begin with.

During the PlayStation era, JRPGs were primarily known for focusing on narratives, while this game is far more focused on mechanics – its emphasis on breeding has drawn comparisons to the *Derby Stallion* series, although featuring humans and gods rather than horses. And indeed, most of the game is spent dungeon crawling, levelling up, and replacing fallen warriors. In addition to expanding your clan, you can also devote resources to rebuilding your home base of Kyoto. Combat is fairly typical, presented from a side-on view, à la *Final Fantasy,* though a pre-battle roulette will determine what goods you'll obtain when you win. You can also finish encounters quickly by aiming for the enemy leader, though killing everyone tends to produce more bonuses.



It also has a 2D graphical style based on ukiyo-e woodblock prints, though the animation is simple.

This type of gameplay was probably deemed too hardcore for an international audience at the time, plus its setting and concept were perhaps a little too unusual. A later PSP port, which enhances the visuals and makes assorted tweaks, did not leave Japan either. However, a 2016 Vita sequel was released in English, called *Oreshika: Tainted Bloodlines.* The main improvement here is 3D for the visuals – due to the simple 2D graphics of the original game, most of the characters looked identical, but here the warriors are a blend of both their human and godly parents, giving each a unique look. It also expands on the types of random dungeon you'll face, making play less repetitive.

A major point of contention, at least within the Japanese fanbase, was the inclusion of a playable character called Nueko, herself taken from the loosely tied-in novel by Masuda called *Onikiri Nueko: Hyakki Yagyou Gakuen.* The game forces you to use her in certain circumstances, requiring that you take resources away from your other characters, so you need to build your strategy around her presence. Outside of that, it's fairly faithful to the original, and a great way for international fans to experience *Oreshika.*

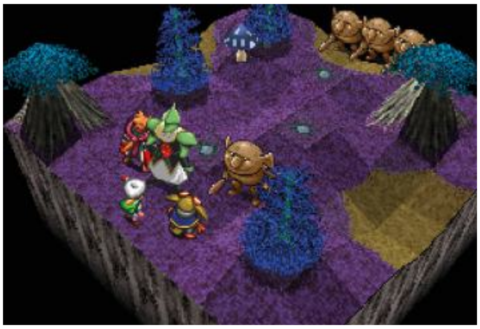
***Oreshika* is definitely pretty far from what you'd expect from a typical JRPG, being more of a dungeon crawler with an odd breeding mechanic.**

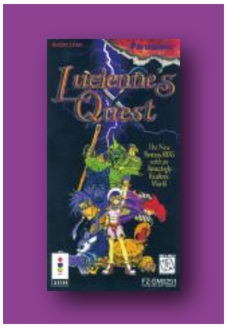
Lucienne's Quest

Developer: Micro Cabin | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): 3DO, SAT

The 3DO didn't have much in the way of Japanese software support, and even less when it came to RPGs, but it did have *Lucienne's Quest* (known under the more generic title *Sword and Sorcery* in Japan). It came from Micro Cabin, which earlier produced computer RPGs like *Xak* and *Illusion City*, and also put out the unusual strategy game *Guardian War* for the 3DO.

In most ways, *Lucienne's Quest* is a pretty typical JRPG, in which you control a 15-year-old apprentice wizard named Lucienne, who tricks a traveller named Ago into thinking she can cure his lycanthropy. What starts as a prank eventually turns into a world-spanning trek to defeat a villain named Death Shadow. It's got a silly sense of humour about it, plus it's one of the first RPGs to use the 2D sprites on 3D backgrounds aesthetic seen in PlayStation and Saturn games. The environments look pretty boxy, which is expected given the early 3D hardware, but there's an odd charm to it. In battle, the field has nine squares, each with a front and back row, plus obstacles that can occasionally get in the way of combat. Since Ago can turn into a werewolf, the day/night cycle will affect his strength. Overall, it's short and simple but fun, though it's also one of the most expensive American 3DO games on the second-hand market.





The game got a second chance on the Saturn, at least in Japan, which added an FMV intro, some voice acting, and a number of quality-of-life improvements. Many of the textures and sprites were completely changed though, removing much of the bright and poppy feel of the 3DO game, plus the revised portraits were turned into generic anime.

Pickings were sparse if you were a JRPG fan who had a 3DO.

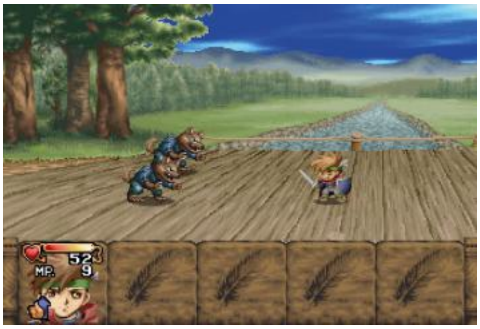
Albert Odyssey: Legend of Eldean

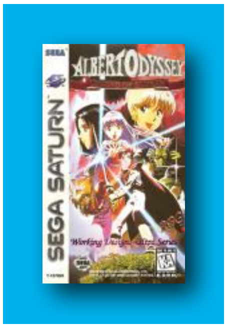
Developer: Sunsoft | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SAT

Albert Odyssey is a duology of SRPGs released for the Super Famicom (see page 541). For the third game, developer Sunsoft made a "gaiden" entry and took the series in a different direction, changing the genre to a more traditional RPG framework, and setting the story long after the events of the original game. So in other words, the Albert of the title doesn't actually appear, though he is referenced in the backstory.

The hero is a boy named Pike, whose parents were slaughtered when he was a baby, so he was raised by a friendly group of angelic harpies. Soon enough, though, the bad guys track him down and turn his adopted sister into a statue, leaving him to grab his father's enchanted, sentient sword Cirrus and take down a cult of evil magicians.

This entry was localised by Working Designs, who tried to position it as a follow-up to the *Lunar* series, primarily because it too has character designs by artist Toshiyuki Kubooka. But *Albert Odyssey* isn't on the same level of quality by any metric – the story is rote, the combat is dull, voice acting is sparse, and there aren't any anime cutscenes. The 2D visuals are just slightly above average, which was otherwise the selling point of many Saturn RPGs. The music, as with the Super Famicom games, is by Sunsoft mainstay Naoki Kodaka, and it's pretty good, but not great. While Working Designs was often criticised for injecting added humour into their localised scripts, and while this was somewhat hit-or-miss in their other games, it's *Albert Odyssey*'s saving grace: the writing is occasionally pretty funny, even if it's not exactly faithful to the Japanese original.

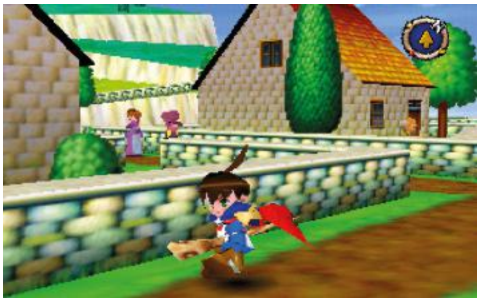




As with *Vay*, Working Designs tried to hype this up as a *Lunar* successor ... and it just isn't.

Quest 64

Developer: Imagineer | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): N64, GBC



Quest 64
THQ

In the late ’90s, it was widely understood that if you wanted RPGs, you’d want a PlayStation. There were a few decent entries on the Saturn, while the Nintendo 64 had naught but *Quest 64*, which came from Imagineer. (This isn’t counting *Ogre Battle 64*, though that’s more of a strategy-RPG hybrid than a regular JRPG). It has the most generic US name in existence, although given the slightest fancier names *Holy Magic Century* in Europe and *Eltale Monsters* in Japan, but the US title is indicative of the kind of experience you’ll be getting.

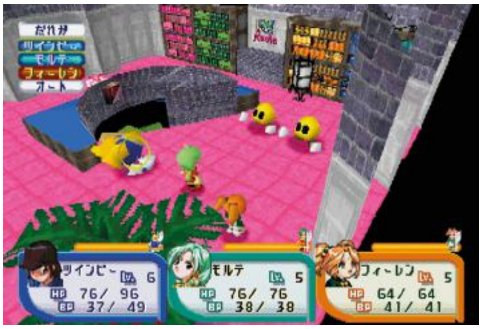
You control an apprentice mage named Brian, off on a hunt for his missing father, which ultimately leads to a quest for an item called the Eletale Book. The game is entirely 3D, and initially resembles something like a lower-quality *Ocarina of Time*, though when you happen upon an enemy, it shifts into turn-based operations. In this mode, within a limited range per turn, you walk around bashing enemies or using magic. Brian is the only playable character, which is dull. The experience system borrows from *Final Fantasy II* for the Famicom, in which there are no levels, instead increasing stats as you perform actions. Upon finding spirits, you can also upgrade one of four elements, which in turn unlocks skills.

Altogether, it’s about as bland as an experience as you can imagine, was derided upon release and has aged terribly, owing to its overly large 3D environments, which are tedious to navigate. Nonetheless, Imagineer created a Game Boy Color port called *Quest: Brian’s Journey*, which is basically the same game but done in 2D (and is still just as boring) while *Quest: Fantasy Challenge* is basically the arcade *Mr. Do* but with Brian in place of the clown character.

***Quest 64* is something of a joke in the RPG community, but its reputation is well-earned.**

TwinBee RPG

Developer: Konami | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1



KCET
ツインビーRPG

Konami’s *TwinBee* franchise started as a series of cutesy shoot-’em-ups, starring anthropomorphic spaceships (including the eponymous TwinBee) and their human pilots. The series became even more popular thanks to a radio drama in the early ’90s, leading to a few spinoffs, including this PlayStation RPG. It made sense, considering that the audience loved the characters, but it’s hard to tell a story in a shooter. *TwinBee RPG* begins as the main character watches the latest episode of *TwinBee* on TV, until something goes horribly wrong and you’re zapped into the show. Finding a baffled TwinBee (sans his pilot, Light) at the side of the road, it’s up to you to explore Donburi Island, gather together the rest of the *TwinBee* crew, find out just what happened to Light, and defeat the evil Professor Warumon once again.

As an early 3D game for the PS1, the game looks a little rough around the edges, plus the camera is terrible, but the bright, anime-style visuals capture the cutesy feel of the other games. In its mechanics, *TwinBee* is similar to *Chrono Trigger*. You can see enemies on the field before you fight them, it has the same active-time battle system, even including combination attacks. Additionally, the player can curry favour with some of the female cast members, leading to specific events. It’s innocent, but it’s weird to have dating events, considering everyone seems to be about 12 years old.

The game is rather clumsy overall – the interface is a pain, and sometimes the next goal is not entirely clear. But it’s still charming for fans of the franchise, and features plenty of voice acting from the radio drama cast.

***TwinBee* has only shown up sporadically outside of Japan, with a single NES game (*Stinger*) and two SNES games that were only released internationally in Europe.**

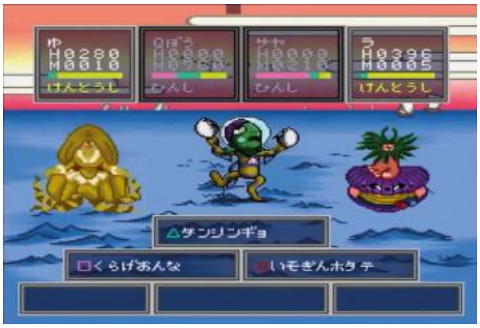
Satomi no Nazo

Developer: Suntech Japan | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): PS1

Satomi no Nazo ("Mystery of Satomi") is one of the most bizarre RPGs to appear on the PlayStation. You control a young boy, who's investigating the disappearance of his mother, an adventure which very quickly leads to the hero travelling back in time to Edo-era Japan.

The game is filled with nonsensical scenarios and dialogue. When you meet one of the heroines, she verbally accosts you, then challenges you to a duel in the wilderness, after which she'll join you. In the first town, there's a fighting teacher who, you would assume, would show you the ropes of combat, but he's so over-powered that he'll murder you. There's an Automatic option for naming your characters, but it chooses random syllables, resulting in gibberish. The game also has several systems designed to streamline gameplay. The DCBS (Direct Command Battle System) means that each enemy is assigned to one of three buttons on the controller. The enemies are single-frame sprites that fly around the screen when they attack, but there are no battle messages or damage indicators, so things flash and numbers mysteriously go down. The PMLS (Progressive Map Link System) connects all the maps vertically, so to progress, you generally just walk upwards. The FECS (Flash Encounter Control System) supposedly causes the battles to load instantly, though that's probably due to the simplicity of the visuals, which look like those in a low-end Super Famicom RPG.

Perhaps most egregiously, the manufacturer slapped a sticker on the retail package that said "Recommended RPG", without quoting any source. This was an unfortunate trick, especially considering that the game was complete garbage.



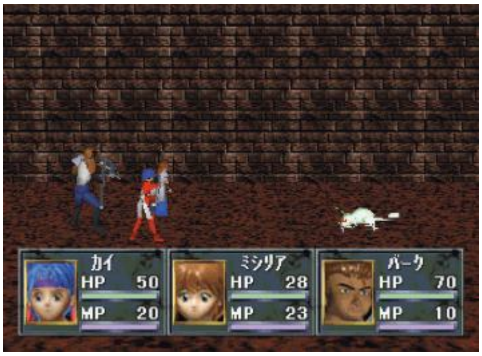
How do you try to get people to buy your garbage RPG? Slap a sticker on it proclaiming it to be a "recommended" product, and hope the consumer doesn't ask "recommended by who?"

Ancient Roman

Developer: Fuga System | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1

Fuga System was a developer mostly known for the *Amaranth* series of PC RPGs, but it decided to hop into console development with *Ancient Roman: Power of Dark Side*. But they probably shouldn't have, because it was perhaps the worst RPG ever released on the PlayStation. The hero is a boy named Kai Orpheas, who was kidnapped by a demon right after he was born, and has lived his whole life as a slave. When he overhears a plot to murder all of the workers, he escapes the camp and begins to hunt down his true destiny.

Ancient Roman very, very desperately wants to be on the same level as something like *Final Fantasy VII*, but Fuga clearly didn't have the talent nor anywhere near the budget of Square. While this is true of many other developers, none of them produced anything as hilariously inept as this game. The FMV CG is laughably bad – an image of a man bellowing at the screen as he's shattered into a thousand pieces by a magic spell should be horrifying, but instead sets the tone for how ridiculous the game is. The developers couldn't afford to create too many screens, so most towns and dungeons are a few images, shown using an extremely zoomed out view that makes it hard to see the characters. The battle scenes are completely 3D, but the heroes are animated such that they look like a kid tossing around toy figures and the enemies appear to be made of origami; when characters die they fly into the sky; it's surreal to watch in motion. The battle balance is off, the script is terrible (and hard to read, as the use of kanji is inconsistent – understandable for cartridge games with space constraints but not CD-ROMs) and the result is laughably amateurish.



This game is so bad that it even misspells the word "Ancient" in its Japanese subtitle.

Beyond the Beyond

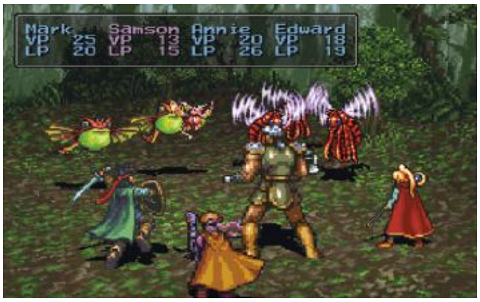
Developer: Camelot | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1

Beyond the Beyond was developed by Camelot, the team behind the *Shining Force* games for the Genesis and Saturn. Rather than being a strategy game or dungeon crawler, however, it's a more traditional JRPG.

In terms of story, *Beyond the Beyond* is pretty boilerplate. The game follows the exploits of Finn, a young swordsman who must travel across the land with his pet dragon, Steiner, in order to put an end to a terrible and evil power that has broken free. Along the way Finn joins forces with numerous other characters, including the young cleric Annie, the knight Percy, the magician Edward, the pirate Domino, and others.

Beyond the Beyond is not remembered fondly by most folks who played it – the game offered little guidance to the player in terms of where to go to advance the plot (even by mid-'90s standards) and thanks to an egregiously high random encounter rate, the player was bound to be spending most of their time in battle anyway. Graphically, as this was a very early PS1 title, it looked like it could have been produced for the SNES or Genesis. Among the few positive things that can be said about the game, it has some fun battle themes by regular Camelot composer Motoi Sakuraba and some clever puzzles in the dungeons.

The game would be completely forgettable if it weren't for several elements that would be carried into Camelot's cult-classic *Golden Sun* franchise (like the dynamic rotating battle camera), so it's become an interesting footnote for the company. When looking at the game as more of an alpha build for what *Golden Sun* would eventually become, it's a far more palatable RPG experience.



PlayStation
Beyond the Beyond

One of the early PS1 RPGs, *Beyond the Beyond* isn't very good, but it did lay the groundwork for the much better *Golden Sun* on the GBA.

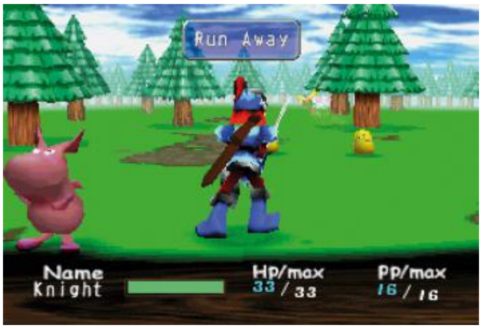
Guardian's Crusade

Developer: Tamsoft | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1

In *Guardian's Crusade*, you control a young knight (default name: Knight) who stumbles upon a baby monster, which looks something like a pink pig-rabbit, and is eventually named "Baby". (The Japanese title is actually *Knight and Baby*.) A mysterious voice compels you to take it to a place called God's Tower, so you adopt it and begin an adventure across the land. The game is the sole RPG by Tamsoft, previously known for the 3D fighter *Battle Arena Toshinden* games, and later known for cheesy brawlers like *Senran Kagura*.

Knight and Baby are the only two active participants in combat, though the companion fairy Nehani occasionally pops in to help. Knight cannot use magic but can collect little toy figures from around the land to help out, which is effectively the same thing. Baby cannot be controlled directly, but can act of his own accord. However, it does function as sort of a virtual pet, as you can feed it items to increase its stats, and depending on how much it likes you, it may copy the forms of the monsters you fight.

The 3D graphics are typical of a mid-range PlayStation title, a little simple, but with bright colour schemes and goofy character designs. There's no demarcation between the overworld and towns, creating a mostly seamless experience without loading times. It's also quite player-friendly, with visible encounters giving you the opportunity to avoid combat, as well as a fast-forward button in battles, which was uncommon in the 32-bit era. Due to its cuteness and simplicity, it was largely regarded as being for kids at the time, but anyone who enjoys charming, laid-back RPGs will also probably enjoy this one.



PlayStation
GUARDIAN'S CRUSADE

***Guardian's Crusade*'s colourful vibe is very different from that of the average PlayStation RPG, which makes it a nice alternative to the norm.**

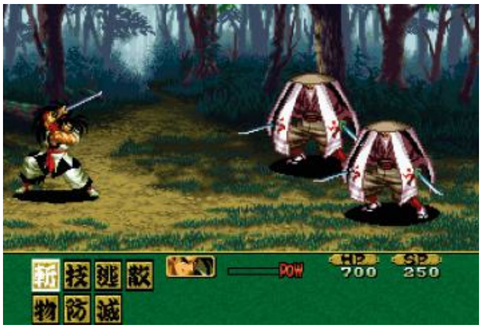
Shinsetsu Samurai Spirits Bushidou Retsuden

Developer: SNK | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): NGCD, PS1, SAT

SNK's fighting games are known for their interesting characters and relatively intricate lore, though almost none of that really came across in the games themselves. So, SNK developed an RPG focusing on one of their most popular series, *Samurai Shodown*, which takes place in a light fantasy version of feudal Japan. You can pick from one of six characters as the main hero – big-haired sword-wielder Haohmaru, his nemesis Genjuro, nature loving Nakoruru, catgirl Cham Cham, tragic warrior Ukyo, or American ninja Galford – and while each has their own unique prologue, they eventually converge onto one of two main stories, each focusing on one of the original two *Samurai Shodown* games. Other characters can join you, except in Genjuro's case, since he's so much of a badass that he (mostly) fights alone.

The battle system is basically *Final Fantasy* meets *Samurai Shodown*, right down to the existence of an ATB-like speed meter. As in the arcade games, characters build Rage when taking hits, increasing their damage output. Special moves are executed via command motions, though this grows tiresome, so it's easier to just pick them from a menu. The long load times bog things down, though the gorgeous pixel artwork, along with the ability to interact with such awesome characters, makes the game worthwhile.

Initially released on the NEOGEO CD, it later came out on the Saturn and PlayStation. The NEOGEO CD version includes an extra scenario with Shizumaru, the PlayStation port includes stories based on the secondary cast, and the Saturn version has a bonus interview mode for various characters. None were translated into English.



There were very few exclusive games for the NEOGEO CD, and the *Samurai Shodown* RPG is one of those.

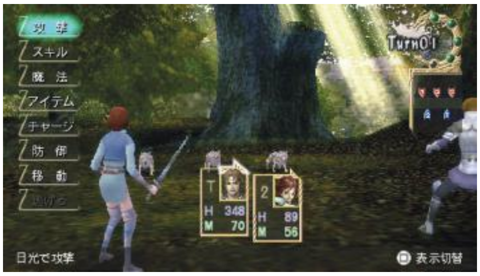
Zill O'll

Developer: Koei | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2, PSP

By the 32-bit era, JRPGs were largely stereotyped in the West as games similar to *Final Fantasy VII*. So it's unfortunate that Koei's *Zill O'll* was never localised, because it's very much the antithesis of that style of game. At the beginning, you can create a name for your character, and the game offers a "free scenario" that lets you visit almost any area in the game world immediately, and sets you on different routes through the main story, depending on what kind of missions you undertake. (Some routes are gender-exclusive as well.) As you travel, time passes in-game, and various story events occur, such as wars between nobles, though the main story focuses on the return of a slumbering, destructive dragon. You can also customise your character by collecting and equipping souls, which act as character classes. In spite of the typical turn-based battle system, it looks and feels more like a Western RPG, as it takes place on a Europe-like continent, and the designs, by fantasy artist Jun Suemi, known for the *Wizardry* games, are very different from typical Japanese manga art.

Initially released on the PlayStation, it later received an update called *Zill O'll Infinite* for the PlayStation 2, which thereafter made its way onto the PSP. Each iteration added more scenarios, playable characters, and endings, making for an experience far more replayable than most RPGs. It's all fairly complex, and there are the usual balance and technical problems that come with such an ambitious product, but its strengths outweigh its weaknesses.

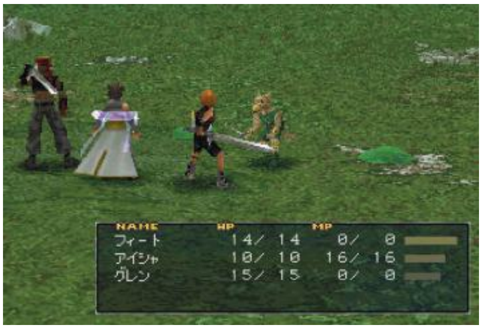
The closest thing to a sequel is the PlayStation 3 title *Trinity: Souls of Zill O'll*. While it takes place in the same world, it's actually a *Dynasty Warriors*-style game and it has little in common with its predecessor.



Koei mostly concentrated on simulation games, but they did release an occasional RPG, like *Zill O'll*.

Elder Gate

Developer: Konami | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS1



ELDERGATE
ROLE PLAYING GAME

The dual worlds of Rosel and Eldora share a common flow of energy, but something has caused them to fall out of balance. As Rosel disappears, a boy named Feat, guardian of the gate that connects the two, journeys to Eldora to make things right. However, every time he enters the gate, the world he reaches is completely different. While procedural generation is central to Rogue-likes, here everything – the overworld map, the towns, the dungeons, even the roles of the characters – is randomised. In addition to hunting for more gates, you also search for eight types of elemental stone, which can be used to create new skills or craft weapons. There are several scenario levels that you must travel through to beat the game, and while Feat's experience level resets upon entering a new one, he is able to maintain his equipment.

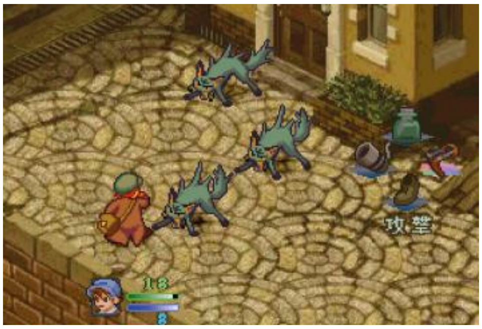
Elder Gate is basically an '80s-style RPG, reminiscent of SystemSoft's *Tir Na Nog*, done in the style of a PS1 JRPG. The appeal lies in the exploration and item gathering, with potentially infinite possibilities, while the story is quite thin. However, procedural generation tends to create areas with lots of dead ends, so lots of time is spent bumbling around, bogged down by slow random turn-based battles. With less tedium and a little more style, it could have been a classic.

It does have some notable names, though – *Castlevania* series producer Koji Igarashi was the director, while the music was contributed by *Symphony of the Night* composer Michiru Yamane, though it's not her best work. The character designs by fantasy artist Junko Taguchi are gorgeous, but the polygonal graphics just don't do them justice, and overall the visuals are uninteresting.

Titles incorporating significant procedural generation need to have finely tuned creation algorithms to create anything playable ... and unfortunately *Elder Gate* is lacking here.

London Seirei Tanteidan

Developer: Unit | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1



London Seirei Tanteidan ("London Spirit Detectives") takes place in the 19th century, just as steam engines were powering industrialisation. You control a ten-year-old boy apprenticed to the world-famous detective John Everett Millais. This game isn't just a Sherlock Holmes rip-off though, as there are quite a few fantastical elements to it, like ghosts and cyborgs. The player is also occasionally joined by other characters, including Aries, the 12-year-old daughter of a scholar, and Virgil, a spirit detective.

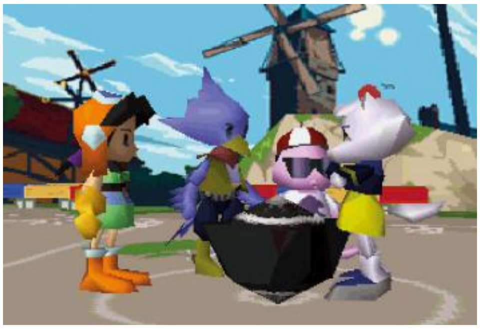
The worldview is the most interesting part of this game, with detailed 2D backgrounds and character sprites illustrating a period that isn't often found in Japanese video games. Most of the dungeons are places like alleys and sewers, giving some grounding to the locations, despite the supernatural elements. Enemies are pests like bats and sewer rats, and you are paid wages by the team hall, the base location where Millais gives out missions, for your efforts. Yasushi Nirasawa, the monster designer for some of the *Kamen Rider* games, illustrated some of the spirits that can be summoned in combat.

Alas, the game fumbles other elements. The battle system is grid-based, though you can't directly control characters, and they automatically walk towards an enemy following targeting. There's nothing wrong with the battle setup (outside of being limited to three characters) but the random encounter rate is fairly high. The game includes 20 scenarios, but the story contains many inconsistencies, probably due to the 11 different writers credited. It's interesting for the setting alone, even if the end result is somewhat messy.

Fight spirits in 19th century England in this uniquely appealing PS1 RPG.

Kasei Monogatari

Developer: Japan Vistec | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1



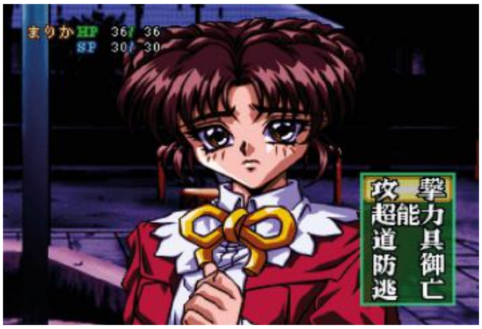
The low-poly look of *Kasei Monogatari* has quite a bit of charm.

Kasei Monogatari ("Mars Tale") originated as a radio drama (with listener participation) on a show hosted by Ouji Hiroi, one of the key creators behind the *Tengai Makyou* and *Sakura Wars* series. The story takes place on Mars, though rather than being the usual red, dusty planet, instead it's home to bustling towns, inhabited by people of many different races. In this world, people are called "symbols" until they reach 12 years of age, after which they undergo a naming ceremony. The 11-year-old hero, Boy A, goes with his friends (including a bird-like boy and a multi-legged alien) on an adventure, but they end up on all sorts of adventures, which send them through various places in time across 30 short episodes. The plot is based on the first few episodes of the radio show, and the episodes are punctuated with little stick-figure plays featuring the characters.

The character artwork, by illustrator Keinojou Mizutama, is adapted into cute 3D models, with a very visually charming look. There's quite a bit of voice acting, including narration by Ouji Hiroi. Since the game was meant for kids, it's quite simple to follow, as big arrows will point you in the right direction once you've completed everything you need to do in a given room. In certain segments, travel is shown as a board game, and you advance based on a spinner. Battle sequences are pretty fun, as you can command your character to walk all around the battlefield, and pick up and throw various things, including other fighters. There are also plenty of mini-games to break up the action. With a heartwarming story and a delightful aesthetic, it's easy enough for non-Japanese readers to enjoy.

Marica: Shinjitsu no Sekai

Developer: Feycraft | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): SAT



Victor
SEGA SATURN
マリカ

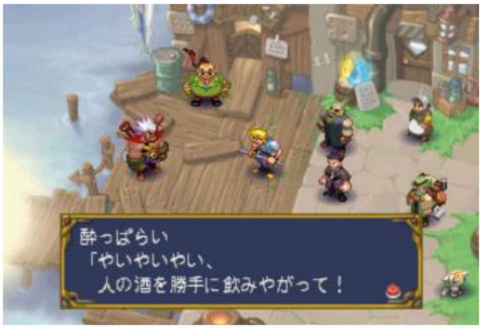
Most 32-bit era RPGs used some amount of 3D, so it's interesting to see the few games that commit so wholly to 2D.

Marica: Shinjitsu no Sekai ("The World of Truth") outwardly looks like an adult game, owing to the anime girls on the cover and the 18+ warning label. But it's actually an action horror RPG that feels like a mid-'90s anime OVA. The main character is Marica Kanzaki, living an average life in Japan, until she happens upon a dying mutant from a mysterious organisation called the Faction of True, which is experimenting on humans to discover how they will evolve. He gives her a disk that contains their vital secrets, but assassins from the Faction quickly track her down. Cornered, she finds a psychic power within her, which she uses to fight back, and to investigate the shadowy organisation. She's not alone though – she's joined by two other girls with different ESP powers, stylish delinquent Akira Kanemoto and high-class Kaname Todo, along with Nobunaga Yakimaki, a sham TV psychic who provides support.

The presentation is the most gripping aspect, as there's a ton of dialogue that's fully voiced, complete with full screen portraits. Battle screens work similarly, with illustrated stills displayed whenever anyone attacks or takes damage. It's similar to *Tengai Makyou: The Apocalypse IV*, in that it's one of the few purely 2D RPGs on the Saturn, and goes the whole hog on the anime. As an RPG, however, it's pretty standard stuff. The game is incredibly linear and not all that long, plus you spend a lot of time listening to characters talk. As such, it's almost more like an adventure game that just happens to have some RPG stuff in it. Still, the story is interesting enough that it's considered a cult classic in Japan, and to see it continued as an online novel.

El Dorado Gate

Developer: Capcom | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): DC



酔っぱらい
「やいやいやい、
人の酒を勝手に飲みやがって！

CAPCOM
第1巻
エルドラドゲート

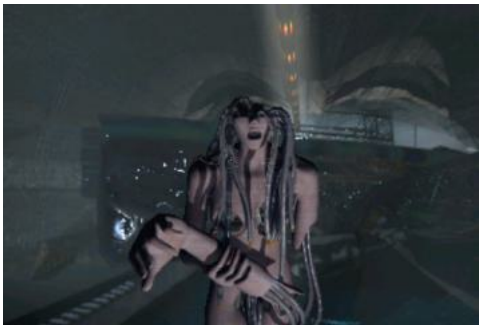
El Dorado Gate was an experiment by Capcom in the realm of episodic gaming. The idea behind it was an expansive RPG, filled with numerous characters, with a new disc released every two months or so, for the relatively low retail price of 2800 yen each (about 25 USD in 1999 money). Each release has two or three scenarios, each of which could be completed in a few hours or so. Seven volumes were released, but, the early death of the Dreamcast meant that the *El Dorado's Gate* saga also met an early, unsatisfying end. It also might have seemed cheap up front, but buying all seven volumes would have cost nearly $200 USD.

As for the games themselves, they're fairly standard JRPGs, despite the large cast and episodic storytelling. There are 12 protagonists in total, who each go on their own quests, and are caught up in a battle against the duelling gods Dios and Raijin. Notable characters include Ein, an ancient Android; Radia, an orphaned thief girl; Pamela, a woman with amnesia; and Lado, a motorcycle-riding youth who's part of a vigilante corps. The connective tissue is Bantross, who acts as guide for the rest. Characters don't gain levels, but equipment does, and you can cast spells by combining magic stones. The field visuals are low-res 2D but they look decent, similar to those in Capcom's earlier *Breath of Fire* PS1 games, while the first-person battle scenes are presented using high-res illustrations from famed artist Yoshitaka Amano, who also provided the cover art. The result has a weirdly incongruous feel. In Japan the games are regarded as ambitious but unremarkable, and Capcom didn't even bother to localise them.

***El Dorado Gate* was an experiment in episodic gaming, which didn't quite take off.**

DeSpiria

Developer: Dennou Eizou Seisakusho | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): DC



deSPIRIA
デスピリア
ATLUS

DeSpiria is one of the few RPGs released on the Dreamcast, developed by Dennou Eizou Seisakusho, which previously worked on the PlayStation first-person horror game *Dark Messiah* (a.k.a. *Hell Night*). It was published by Atlus, and while it's not technically part of their *Shin Megami Tensei* series, it certainly feels like it could be.

It's the year 2070, and much of humanity has either been destroyed or mutated due to a conflict known as the Psalm War. The heroine is a young woman named Allure Valentine, an assassin for an organisation called the Church, which has helped to rebuild the planet. Her mission gets off to a rocky start when her train derails and kills almost everyone but her. However, she also happens to be able to dive into the thoughts of people or the psychic remnants embedded in her surroundings, allowing her to get information and solve puzzles.

The game is presented as a first-person adventure game, similar to early CD-ROM titles like *The 7th Guest*, complete with FMV scene transitions. When combat occurs, she summons mind creatures, which are similar to the demons found in *Shin Megami Tensei*. Rather than the typical fire/earth/wind/water elements, attacks are based on attributes like love, anger, and grudge, while defence is determined by the type of parasite that Allure has attached around her brain.

The visuals are entirely rendered in CG, and the uncanny valley effect actually works in the game's favour, giving the experience a particularly unique horror cyberpunk feel. That atmosphere helps turn *DeSpiria* into one of the most visually engrossing RPGs of its era.

***DeSpiria* may as well be a *Shin Megami Tensei* spinoff, and it's actually surprising that it didn't borrow the label.**

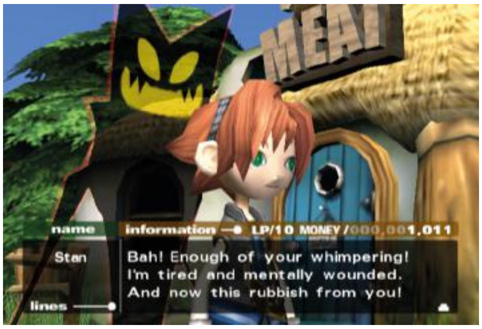
Okage: Shadow King

Developer: Sony/Zener Works | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS2, PS4

Okage: Shadow King (called *Boku to Maou* or "The Demon Lord and Me" in Japanese) is one of the early PlayStation 2 RPGs, and it's quite a hoot. You control a boy named Ari, whose sister is afflicted by a curse, so she speaks only Pig Latin; to save her, Ari makes a deal with a demon lord named Stanley Hihat Trinidad XIV ("Stan" for short), allowing the boy to be possessed by him. While Stan has great plans for world domination, Ari himself isn't particularly strong or scary, so the duo ends up being hilariously ineffective. Thus begins a journey to regain Stan's lost powers so he can become the terrifying leader he so wishes he was.

This is a delightfully silly game. Ari is a silent hero but is given different dialogue options to choose from, with amusing effects. The human characters are modelled with large heads and gangly limbs, like something out of a Tim Burton movie, and Stan himself looks like a particularly amusing Halloween decoration. It's a nice-looking game despite its early-PS2 look and feel.

So it's unfortunate that otherwise, the game is pretty average. You gain two compatriots; combat is like a simple take on *Final Fantasy* (complete with an ATB-style bar). It has a few small novelties: a shared Labour Points pool for special attacks; Stan will occasionally pop in before battle to let you choose an insult (and if he likes it, will do a powerful move); and a status ailment called Tax that reduces the money obtained after battle. It's clearly made for a wider audience than just regular RPG fans, who might find the novelty wearing off quickly. Still, it's a funny and charming little experience.



Bah! Enough of your whimpering!
I'm tired and mentally wounded.
And now this rubbish from you!

PlayStation 2
OKAGE
Shadow King

Stan the Shadow King proves to be an amusing companion in this early PS2 RPG.

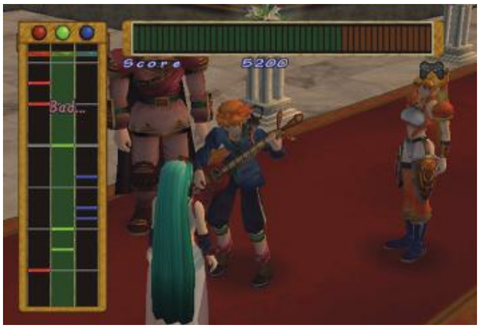
Ephemeral Fantasia

Developer: Konami | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS2

In *Ephemeral Fantasia*, you control musician/thief Mouse and his sentient talking guitar Pattimo, who are invited to the island of Pandule to write a wedding song. However, you quickly learn that the groom, a sinister man named Xelpherpolis, has the entire island trapped in a time loop. So you must live the same five days over and over, slowly leading the inhabitants to become aware of their prison and join you in fighting against him.

The premise here is a little too close to *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* for comfort, though it plays differently. It's still like a standard JRPG, complete with a turn-based battle system as in *Final Fantasy*, although the ATB system is altered so that different moves vary in their recovery times. Also, among the usual mini-games, there's a music-themed one based on Konami's rhythm game *Guitar Freaks*.

The game was planned for the Dreamcast, and as an early PlayStation 2 release, and it's behind the curve technically, especially in its lengthy load times between areas. But the bigger issue is that the structure is a little too open. Since the game advances in real time, and everything happens according to a set schedule, it's hard to figure out exactly what to do without a guide. Also, if you miss an event, you have to wait until the next loop to reach it again. The island is also pretty big, and it's troublesome to constantly trudge across it. Though you can fast forward through cutscenes, the game really needs a way to speed up time and travel around quickly, because it ends up being quite tedious. While the island atmosphere is pleasant, the juvenile writing does little to make the game worthwhile beyond its novelty.



PlayStation 2
Ephemeral Fantasia

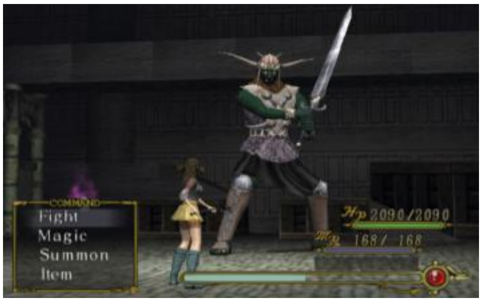
This early PS2 RPG got lambasted by critics for its technical issues, but there's an interesting game buried in here somewhere.

Tsugunai: Atonement

Developer: Cattle Call | Released: 2001 | Platform(s): PS2

In *Tsugunai*, you control a mercenary named Reise, who is tasked with stealing an artefact called the Treasure Orb. Except, uh oh, it's cursed, and it separates his spirit from his body; he is still conscious of the world around him, but he can't interact with much of anything, and his corporeal form lies in a coma. What he can do is temporarily possess the bodies of other people, using his strength to help them out, and thereby atone for his sins.

There are thirty-five quests in total, revolving around the folks in the fishing village Reise explores, though not all of them involve combat. For the ones that do, *Tsugunai* features a unique battle system, in which you only control a single fighter. Attacking is done by picking commands from a menu, as usual, but when it comes to defence, you can use the four buttons for different abilities – you can block, dodge, counterattack, or absorb the hit but build up your attack meter. Since it's heavily reflex-based, there's a risk-reward balance for every action, but the animations are slow. If you manage to assemble various amulets, you can summon a partner creature in battle, though you can't directly control them.



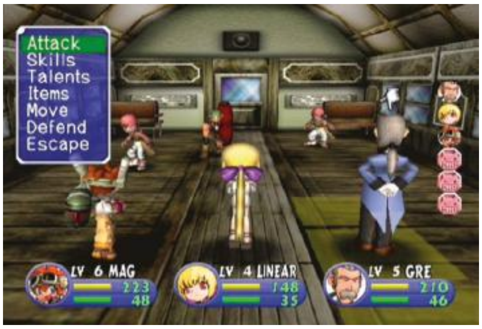
PlayStation 2
TSUGUNAI

Tsugunai was one of the first JRPGs released for the PlayStation 2. From a technical perspective, the visuals are far better than what the original PlayStation could do, but it still looks pretty bland. The game world is also concentrated almost solely on the village, and its surrounding areas, so the game world isn't very large. What it does have is a fantastic soundtrack from Yasunori Mitsuda, which sounds like a mixture of *Xenogears* and *Chrono Cross*, two of his most famous works. The soundtrack album, *An Cinniùint*, is worth having on its own, even though the game it's from is middling.

The concept of possession is at the centre of *Tsugunai*, but it's really carried by its magnificent soundtrack.

Evolution (series)

Developer: Sting | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): DS, GC, NGPC

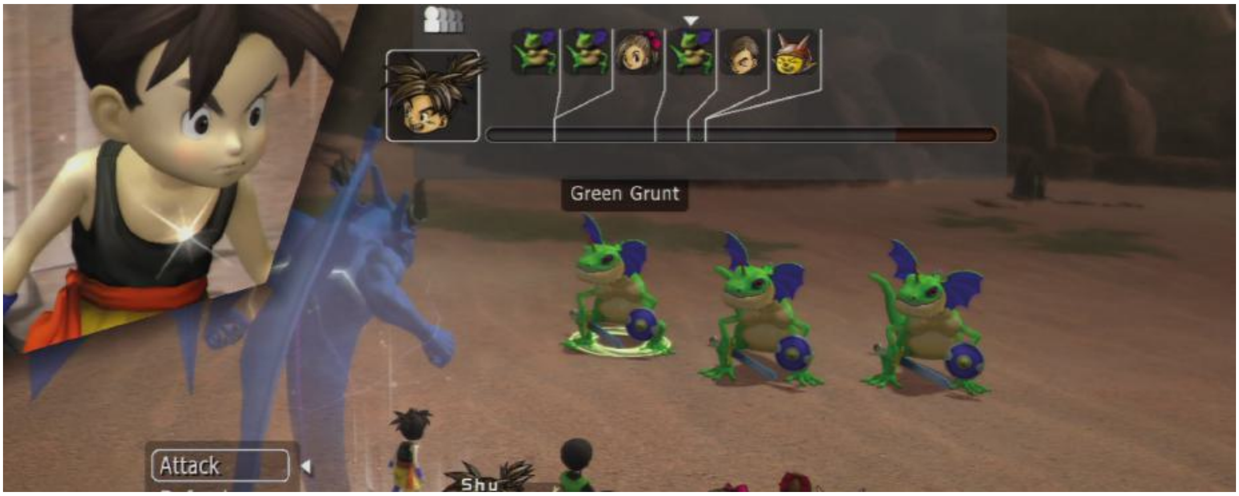


EVOLUTION
SEGA

Every console had an early RPG that was rushed to market, and in the Dreamcast's case, that game was Sting's *Evolution*. It stars a treasure hunter named Mag Launcher, who, along with a cast of characters also named after weapons (Linear Cannon, Chain Gun, and Gre Nade), explores ruins to look for goodies. These dungeons are randomised, so there's little more to the game than exploring and battling. The super-deformed characters are charming, but the stale environments completely drain any potential life the game may have had. The fights are typical, though enemies and party members can shift into three different positions, which changes the damage you can deal or receive, as well as your order in the turn queue. Characters have a lot of different abilities, which can be unlocked via points obtained from battle, but the battles still never feel like anything more than a chore.

A sequel was also released, which contains a slightly more ambitious story, though the crux of the game is very similar. The dungeons are a little more interesting, since they are now preset, though there's still an optional random dungeon to explore. For the GameCube, both games were compiled together into a single game called *Evolution Worlds* – however, the content of the first game was heavily truncated, cutting the five dungeons down to two. The Western release also features English voice acting, while the original Dreamcast release had only Japanese. The first game was also ported to the NEOGEO Pocket Color as *Evolution: Eternal Dungeons*, which is basically the same game but in 2D, and using pre-designed dungeons instead of randomised ones.

This Dreamcast RPG series is largely focused on dungeon crawling, and doesn't develop this into anything interesting.



Blue Dragon

Developer: Mistwalker/Artoon | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): DS, X360

XBOX 360
BLUE DRAGON

***Blue Dragon* is an okay early JRPG effort for the Xbox 360, but nowadays it's mostly known for its insanely cheesy boss battle theme.**

After the failure of the original Xbox in Japan, Microsoft tried its darnedest to get the country to care about its successor, the Xbox 360. One of its first major attempts involved drafting the services of Mistwalker, a production studio founded by Hironobu Sakaguchi, one of the creators of the *Final Fantasy* series. Their first project, in conjunction with developer Artoon, brought together artist Akira Toriyama and musician Nobuo Uematsu to create a classically-styled JRPG called *Blue Dragon*.

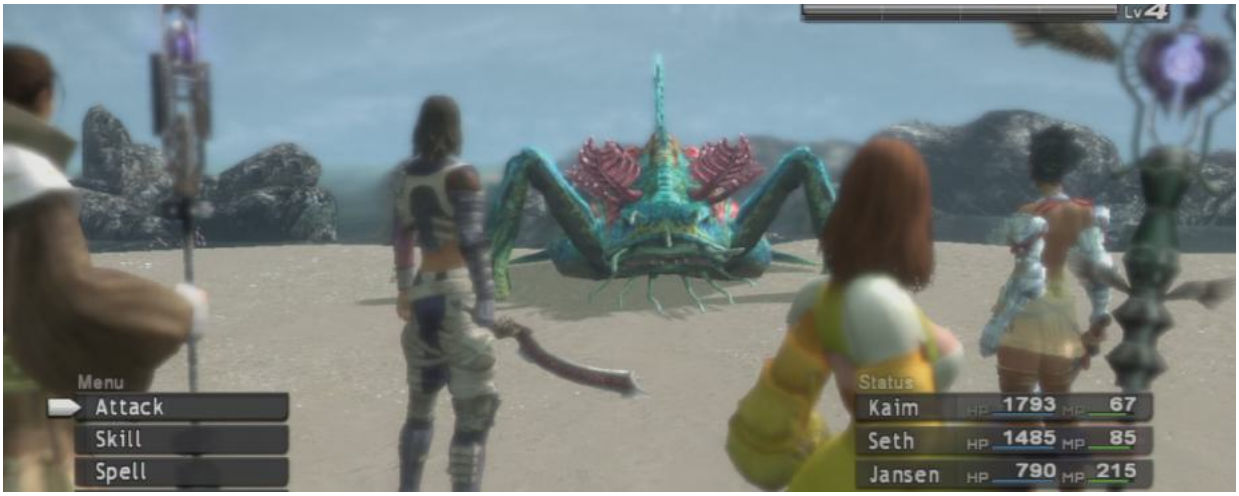
The game takes place in a world that's regularly terrorised by a mysterious purple mist. A trio from the village of Talta – Shu, Jiro, and Kluke – trace its origin to a villain named Nene, by whom they are summarily pummelled. But after their defeat, they obtain blue shadows, which grant them stronger powers. Together with the demon kid Marumaro and swordswoman Zola, they begin a quest to defeat Nene in earnest.

Blue Dragon's entire identity is a mish-mash designed to pull the nostalgia strings of Japanese gamers. The enemy designs are often very *Dragon Quest*, and the characters shadow-summoning animations recall *Dragon Ball Z*, while the game's curious obsession with poop hails back to earlier Akira Toriyama manga like *Dr. Slump*. Meanwhile, the battle system feels a lot like *Final Fantasy X*'s, complete with an on-screen turn queue that indicates when combatants can act. The twist here is that you can charge your shadows by holding down the button, potentially making you act after other characters but giving your move an extra burst of power. The class and ability-learning system is very similar to *Final Fantasy V*'s Job system too, though it's lacking in fun uniforms for the game's five primary party members. Random battles are ditched in favour of visible encounters, though. The default difficulty is too easy, though a harder level is available via free DLC.

As an early Xbox 360 title, the visuals are not great, with everything having a heavy depth-of-field blur. The character models are fine – the close-up view of your members during combat is a nice touch – and while the locales have attractive designs, the level layouts are pretty dull. The battle segments chug too, with regular frame drops and screen tearing, though this is mitigated in the backwards-compatible Xbox One version.

The game was successful at wooing Japanese gamers, where it was a success; it was less popular in North America and Europe, where the audience looked at the staff and assumed it would be something like *Chrono Trigger*. Its simplistic story and straightforward characters hearken back to an earlier era, so it feels like a late 8-bit/early 16-bit JRPG, just with more modern systems. If Western gamers remember it for anything, it's the boss battle rock anthem "Eternity", sung by Deep Purple singer Ian Gillan, whose vocal cords had seen better days.

There were two DS sequels, one a real-time strategy game, the other an action RPG. The anime and manga tie-ins deviate substantially from the games.



Lost Odyssey

Developer: Mistwalker/Feelplus | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): X360

Lost Odyssey was released not long after *Blue Dragon*, and was Mistwalker and Microsoft's other big push to cater for Japanese gamers. It's another RPG, this time more closely patterned after the more modern *Final Fantasy* games.

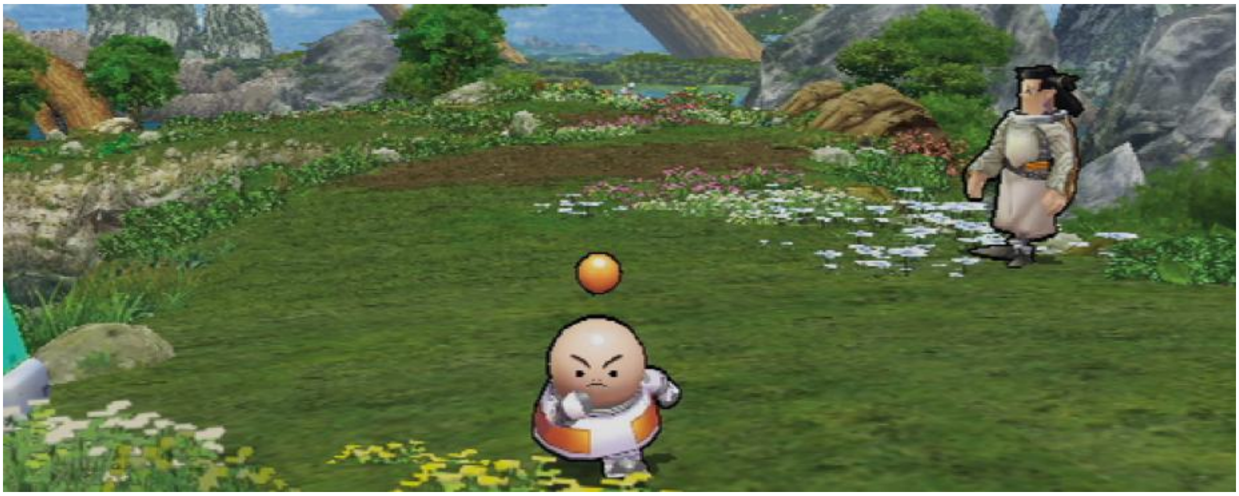
The story takes place in a world undergoing a Magic-Industrial Revolution, as technology has allowed for advancements in transportation, communication, and weaponry. With these societal advancements comes war, as the countries of Gohtza and Uhra become embroiled in conflict. Caught in the centre is a group of immortals, including the hero, the mercenary Kaim Argonar, who has recently lost his memory. He sets off on a mission to investigate a mysterious meteor attack, while trying to piece together his lost past.

The story has a pretty interesting setup, but since the game only focuses on a small portion of these characters' lives, their history is fleshed out by a series of short stories called "A Thousand Years of Dreams". These are presented entirely in text, with just vague images and some music in the background. Most of these are excellent, and many quite heart-wrenching; the writing quality is substantially better than what's found in the actual game, which is typical JRPG stuff. The exception is Jansen, the buffoonish magician, whose sarcastic asides make a welcome contrast to Kaim's worldweariness. As one of the game's handful of mortal party members, he's much more grounded than the rest of the cast, plus his dialogue and English voice acting creates a comic relief character who's actually funny, something of a rarity in Japanese RPGs.

The battle system is pretty similar to that in *Final Fantasy X*, complete with turn-based combat and a turn queue. When executing most attacks, there's a brief animation of the combatant running towards the enemy (presented with a close-up shaky cam, à la *Gears of War*'s "roadie run"), along with a short timing challenge, which can grant extra damage if successful. Strangely, immortal characters don't feel much different in combat from mortal ones: they're just slightly stronger. They can, however, learn any skills from their mortal friends via a Skill Link system. A Guard Condition gauge also uses the HP of the characters in the front row to provide defence for the ones in the back.

As with *Blue Dragon*, Nobuo Uematsu provided the soundtrack, most of it excellent. At this point in his career he apparently had a proclivity for over-the-top boss battle themes, with the final fight tune having a somewhat ridiculous Japanese rap plunked into the middle of it. The character designs are by Takehiko Inoue, known for the manga *Vagabond*, and they help give *Lost Odyssey* a more distinct identity, beyond that of *Final Fantasy* clone. The game's major sore point is its long loading times, which, combined with the somewhat drawn-out battles, make things a little sluggish. But considering how much the *Final Fantasy* series evolved after its tenth entry, it's a good alternative for gamers looking for something more traditional.

Make some minor changes and *Lost Odyssey* could very well be slotted in as part of the *Final Fantasy* series.



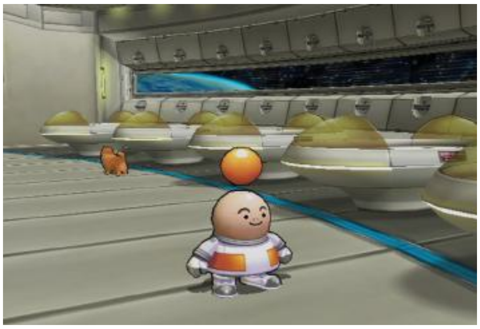
Opoona

Developer: Koei/Artepiazza/Cattle Call | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): WII

In *Opoona*, you are one of a race called the Tizians, who are part of the Cosmic Guard that protects the universe. They possess and wield holy energy, which takes the form of little orbs floating above their heads, called a Bon-Bon. You and your family have begun a vacation, travelling across the galaxy to a planet called Landroll, but an unfortunate accident causes your ship to crash on the surface. You awaken safely, but separated from the rest of the clan. You're immediately enrolled in school and tasked with becoming a ranger.

Opoona advertises itself as a "lifestyle RPG", which refers to its laid-back nature and your character's ability to take on a variety of jobs. The civilisation of Landroll is entrenched in bureaucracy, so in order to do anything, you need to obtain a licence. Some are required to advance through the story, to visit other cities in search of your family, or to advance your role as a monster-hunting ranger. Others, however, are optional. Over the course of the game, you can enter the service industry, starting as a fast food cashier and rising up the ranks to hotel owner; you can become a fisherman, miner, and farmer; you can join an idol group and dance; learn to play the ukulele; or, become a fortune teller using your Bon-Bon; or take on jobs as a janitor, delivery man or detective. The world of Landroll is well-established, thanks to its elaborate backstory and clearly communicated culture, and this is easily the strongest point of the game. The soundtrack by Hitoshi Sakimoto is a beautiful mix of orchestrations and synthesisers, giving it a fresh, futuristic feel.

You still do spend a good amount of time fighting, in the Active Bon-Bon Battle system. Much like the *Final Fantasy* battle system it's named after, it works in real-time. When one of your character's turns comes up, you can hold the stick back to charge up the strength of your Bon-Bon, with shorter charges being weaker but allowing your next turn to come around more quickly. You also need to pay attention to enemy movements, because if they're coming in for an attack, your throws can miss. Alternatively, time it right and you can use your Bon-Bon to deflect that attack. You can also customise your Bon-Bon in various ways.

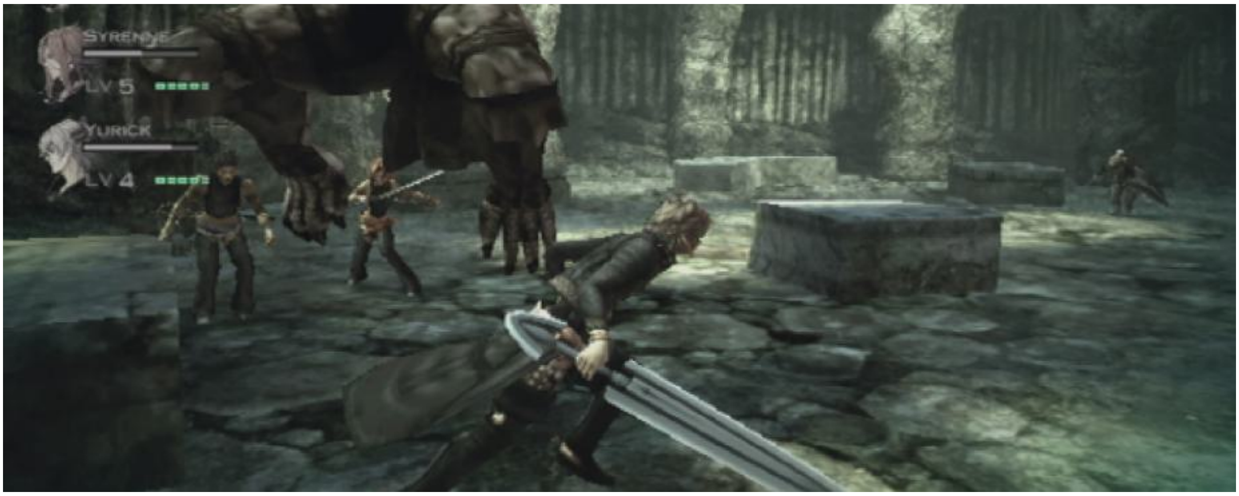


Wii
opoona
オプーナ
KOEI

While far from a success by any metric, *Opoona* still has a small number of devoted fans.

Alas, the game itself falls victim to the bureaucracy it seems to be poking fun at. So much of the game involves getting licences, by means of typically rather repetitive sub-quests. The opening town of Tokione is so massive that it's incredibly difficult to navigate; add in the near-useless map and the often confusing camera, and the early parts of the game are quite frustrating.

The game was an flop in Japan, where it ended up released on the same day as *Super Mario Galaxy*; it didn't fare any better in North America. Pretty much everyone criticised its Fisher-Price-like character designs, giving the impression of a kiddie game. *Opoona* definitely has its problems, but its charming atmosphere and world-building give it the makings of a cult classic.



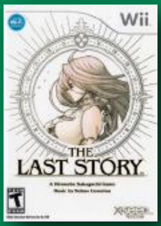
The Last Story

Developer: Mistwalker/AQ Interactive | Released: 2011 | Platform(s): WII

The Last Story puts you in the role of Zael, one of a group of mercenaries working on the island of Lazulis. While in the capital city, he encounters a mysterious woman, who turns out to be the noblewoman Lady Calista, who's facing an arranged marriage. But before any wedding can happen, the party is crashed by the Gurak, a long-exiled race taking back what is theirs.

What follows is a fairly standard chosen-one story, in which Zael uses his special powers to fight back, though it's all pretty well done. His fellow mercenaries are a diverse, likeable bunch, like the feisty, foul-mouthed Syrenne and the ladies' man Lowell, and while they're broadly drawn, their constant mid-adventure banter helps make the journey worthwhile. The visuals provide a stylish twist on a typical fantasy world, and it's one of the better-looking games on the Wii, despite its muted colour palette and the overdone bloom effects, the latter being pretty typical of games from this era anyway.

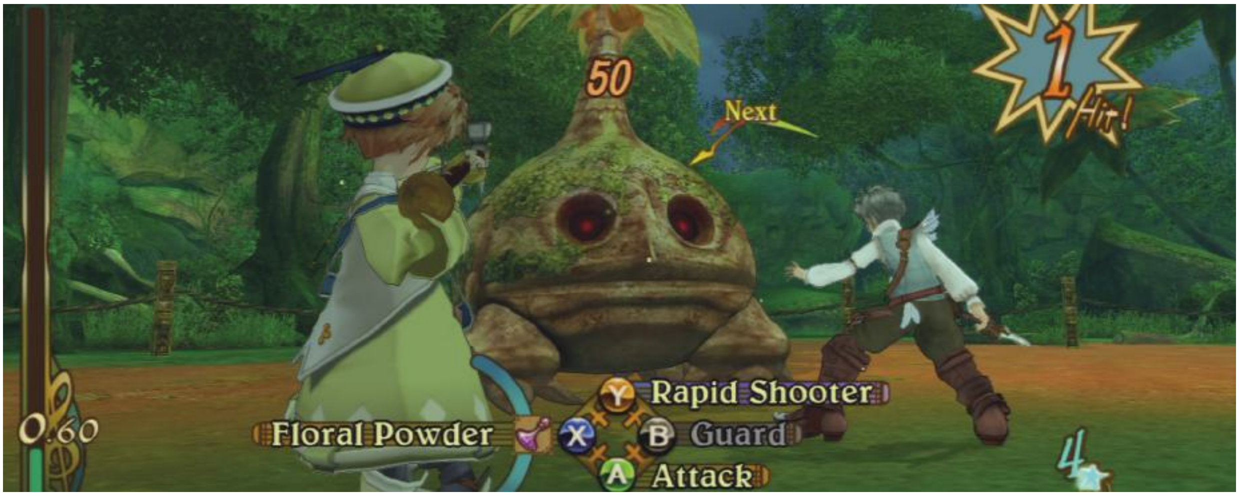
Effectively, *The Last Story* can be described as a JRPG *Gears of War*. The player only controls Zael directly, and the rest of his team fights alongside him. While he'll attack automatically when guided towards an enemy, he can also hide behind scenery and leap out to perform stronger attacks, block, perform dodge rolls, and shoot at things with a crossbow. Plus he has a skill called Gathering, which will cause all enemies to focus their attacks on him, and can eventually give more direct orders to his companions. There aren't really any random encounters or trash mobs in this game, as most scenarios are uniquely tailored for their areas, and you can do things like smashing the scenery to help take down foes more easily. While not very difficult, it's fast paced and fun, free of the repetition that tends to typify RPGs, and is a good alternate take on games with similar battle systems, like *Final Fantasy XII* and *Xenoblade*.



Progression is quite linear, and you're led from chapter to chapter, though there are often breaks where you can wander around to perform sub-quests. The story isn't very long, aiming at around 20 hours for the first run through, and the world isn't very big either, with only a single town and a handful of dungeons. But it still manages to feel less linear than *Final Fantasy X* and *XIII*.

The game is by Mistwalker, the studio run by Hironobu Sakaguchi, and was one of the three Operation Rainfall titles. Compared to Mistwalker's *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey*, which were basically traditional JRPGs given a modern HD makeover, *The Last Story* is inspired more by modern games and indeed feels less crusty. It's also the first game directed by Sakaguchi since *Final Fantasy V*, back in the 16-bit days (he served as a producer for the others), and it does feel like one of his classic works, so it's a comfortable blend of old and new. And while Nobuo Uematsu's score doesn't quite match his *Final Fantasy* achievements (or even those in Mistwalker's other works), its orchestrated sound still provides a memorable backdrop for the action.

The localisation campaign Operation Rainfall had to beg Nintendo to release several RPGs in North America, including this one. It's been overshadowed by *Xenoblade*, one of the other games in the campaign, but it certainly doesn't deserve to be forgotten.



Eternal Sonata

Developer: tri-Crescendo | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): X360, PS3

Frédéric Chopin was a 19th century Polish composer who died of tuberculosis at the relatively young age of 39. Tri-Cresendo's *Eternal Sonata* (known as *Trusty Bell* in Japan) takes place almost entirely in a fantasy world, basically a fever dream within Chopin's mind, as he lies on his deathbed. Here, he meets a variety of colourful folks, all with musically-themed names, including Polka, a magical girl who is cursed with an incurable disease, and brothers Allegretto and Beat, who begin a journey that gets entangled with a war between kingdoms. Each of the game's eight chapters is based on one of Chopin's compositions. The game was developed by tri-Crescendo, previously known for doing audio work on assorted tri-Ace games, as well as *Baten Kaitos.*

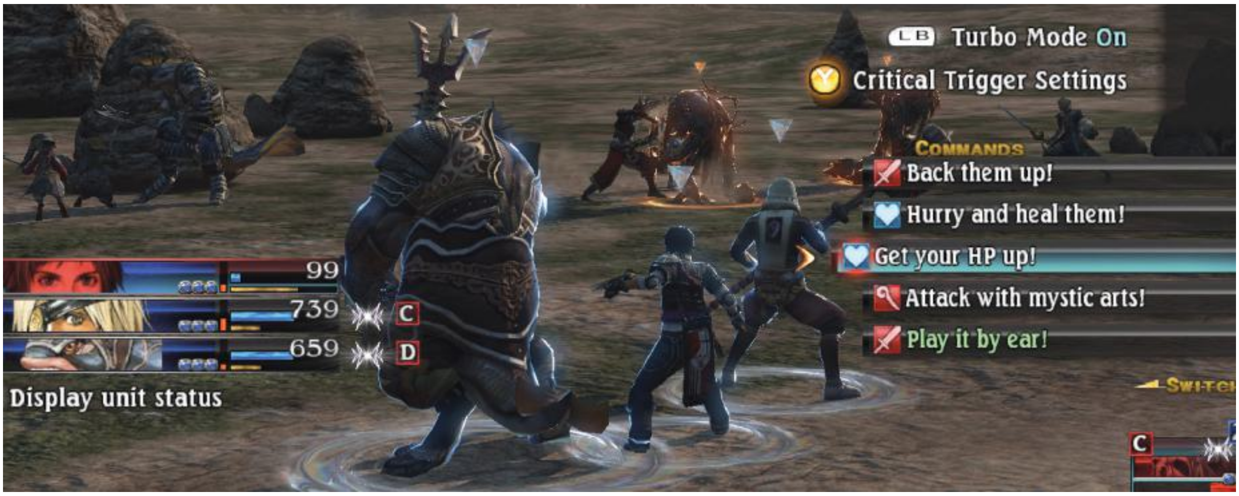
Among the products of the JRPG boom in the early days of the Xbox 360, *Eternal Sonata* is one of the best-looking, with gorgeous coloured buildings and lush forests to explore. The soundtrack features some works by Chopin, but much of the music is provided by Motoi Sakuraba, exchanging his usual prog rock stylings for a more orchestral feel. While this is one pretty game, the rest of the package is less successful. The story has a strange, detached atmosphere, partially due to Chopin being such a boring character, and partially due to the rambling storytelling. The cutscene direction is dreadful, filled with aimless dialogue, poor voice acting, bad pacing, and ridiculous melodrama. The most egregious example is a death scene that lasts nearly ten minutes, which is so long it actually flashes back on itself. This is all for a minor character who has spent maybe an hour or two with the party, so it completely lacks emotional resonance. Later, during the end credits, the characters speak to the player about the value of embracing life.

ETERNAL SONATA
PLAYSTATION 3

The battle system of *Eternal Sonata* is, at first, pretty fun. You control each character on the battlefield directly, one at a time, and are given five seconds to run around or perform actions before getting moved on to the next character's turn. Building up combos using regular attacks powers up your special moves. You also need to pay attention to the lighting on the field, as your special attacks change depending on whether you're in the light or the shade. Certain bad guys can transform depending on where they're standing too. When enemies attack you, you can block (or counterattack) if you hit the button prompt at the correct moment.

The initial Xbox 360 release was very obviously rushed, but the PlayStation 3 version, which came out a year later, makes some significant additions. In the original version, regular battles grew tedious, since enemies remained in the same position on the field, but this release randomises their positions. The 360 version was also too easy, while the PlayStation 3 version rebalances everything to be almost too difficult. It does add a whole bunch of extra cutscenes that at least help the originally rather vague story make sense. Ultimately these are bandages for a pretty, but shallow, experience.

A fantasy that takes place in the fever dream of a real-life classical composer is a wild concept, though probably not the strangest seen in the JRPG genre.



The Last Remnant

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): X360, WIN, PS4, NSW, IOS, AND

PS4
LAST REMNANT
Remastered

Square Enix has been known to make its own engines for its games, and has ended up in hot water over the matter more than once. This proved to be an issue with *Final Fantasy XIII* and the Crystal Tools engine. Having a desire to test the waters with third-party tools, the then president of the company, Yoichi Wada, ordered a viability test using Epic Games' Unreal Engine 3. The result, a company first in this respect, was *The Last Remnant*, released in 2008. It was based on a concept by Akitoshi Kawazu, directed by Hiroshi Takai, and developed primarily by the *SaGa* team.

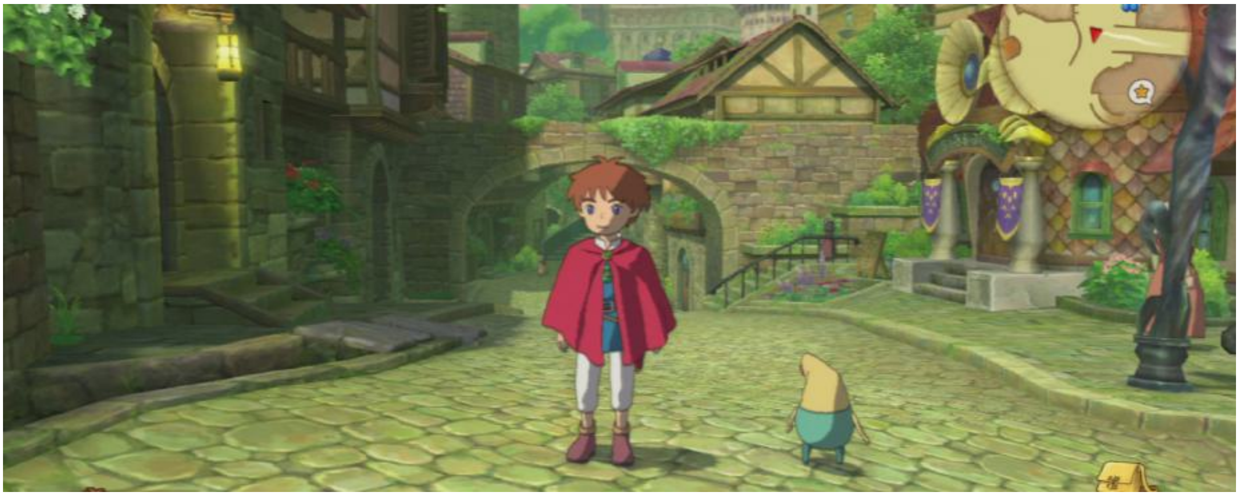
Set in a world where societies are built, both figuratively and literally, around ancient artefacts known as Remnants, the game focuses on a young man named Rush, who is in pursuit of his abducted sister Irina. During this search, he bungles his way into a battle, nearly causing casualties in the army of Lord David of Athlum. Almost mistaken for an enemy, Rush is saved by his unwitting demonstration of a great power, which leaves Lord David inclined to hear the boy out. Interested in his cause, the young Lord recruits the boy to his banner, as a political power-play is soon to be made.

The Last Remnant is notable for its squad-based combat. The player can arrange up to five squads, using varying formations and numbers of units. Owing to the game's strong *SaGa* roots, units improve and learn techniques and spells in a style similar to later *SaGa* games. Rather than engage in individual action selections in combat, the player instead issues context-based commands to the army for them to carry out. Each squad has its own measure of resources/indicators. Position on the battlefield is very important, as both enemy and ally squads can flank or surround others, which will impact Morale. Should Morale shift strongly in favour of one side or the other, the advantaged side will become formidable indeed.

Composed primarily by Tsuyoshi Sekito with Yasuhiro Yamanaka to provide back-up, the soundtrack is one of the highlights of the game. While a good chunk of the music is orchestral in nature, the real highlight is Sekito's use of his collection of guitars. Sekito made a point of having the music during battles adjust dynamically, depending on how things are going for the player.

Initially released on the Xbox 360, it was clear that Square Enix was struggling with the Unreal Engine: the game was plagued with graphical and technical issues that led to many publications panning it as a buggy mess. Some months later, *The Last Remnant* received a PC port incorporating a wide swath of fixes and corrections, which not only smoothed over the technical issues, but also made some gameplay revisions that made the combat smoother. Rush's character was criticised as being less than thrilling, though this was something a mere tune-up could not fix. About a decade later, in 2019, a remaster using the Unreal Engine 4 was released on the PS4, though the PC version disappeared from digital shopfronts.

The *SaGa* series was still recovering from the flop that was *Unlimited Saga*, so *The Last Remnant* is basically a *SaGa* game in all but name.



Ni no Kuni

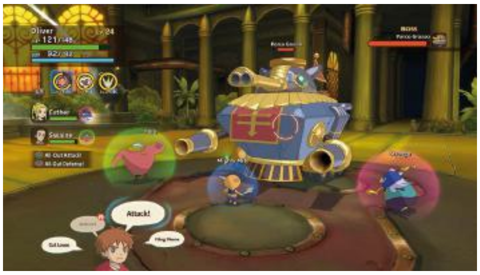
Developer: Level-5 | Released: 2011 | Platform(s): PS3, DS, PS4, NSW, WIN

After working on two *Dragon Quest* games for Enix, Level-5 decided to try its hand at its own fairytale-style RPG, producing *Ni no Kuni* ("Two Worlds"). The protagonist is Oliver, a boy living in an American town, who is coping with the sudden death of his mother. All of a sudden, one of his stuffed toys comes to life, proclaims himself to be a fairy named Drippy, and shows him the alternate fantasy world referenced in the title. Every being is connected to a kind of soulmate in this parallel world, and Drippy suggests they may be able to bring Oliver's mother back to life.

Ni no Kuni is a collaboration with animation studio Ghibli, featuring artwork reminiscent of classic anime films like *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*. There's plenty of FMV footage, and the in-game visuals are gorgeous as well. The location designs are stunning – the opening city of Ding Dong Dell has stunning Gaudi-esque architecture, and even the sewer dungeons look pretty – and all this is complemented by an orchestral soundtrack by composer Joe Hisaishi.

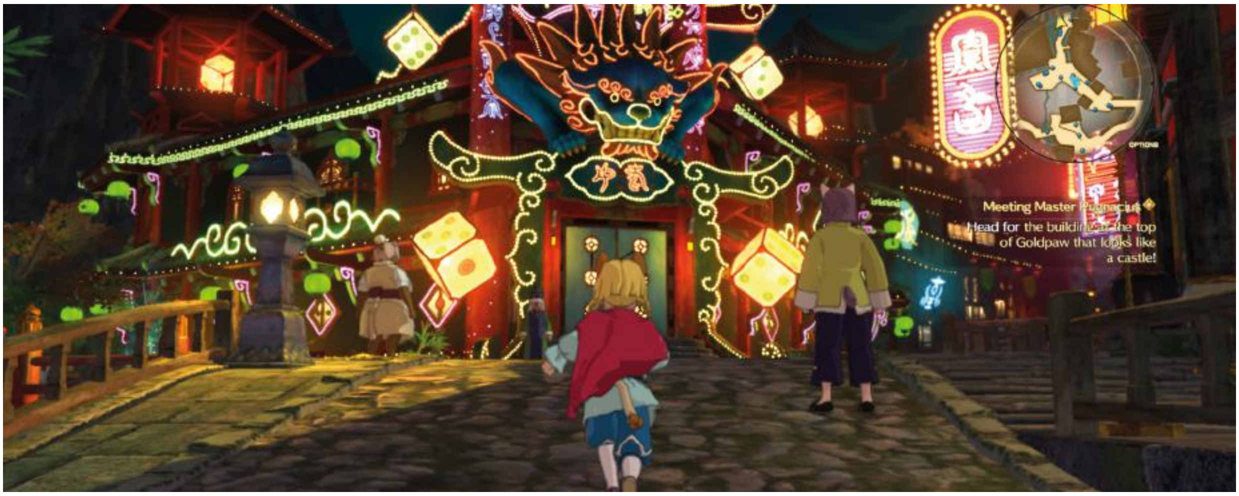
In spite of the rather depressing prologue, in which we witness Oliver's mother's death, there's a real sense of joy and wonder in the game. Drippy, with his excitable Welsh accent, makes an amusing tour guide through the world. Much of the quest is spent collecting and fixing people's "emotions", which helps contextualise the sub-quests nicely, compared to standard RPG fare.

While Level-5 has created a compelling world, well worth exploring, its biggest stumbling block is its battle system. It's sort of like *Final Fantasy XII's*, without the Gambit system, in that you have free run of the arena, but still need to enter commands via menus. This allows you to run away from enemy attacks, and pick up little dropped orbs that replenish your HP and MP. The game encourages you to strike at enemy weak points, or defend at specific moments, but between rummaging through the menus, and the wind-ups and cool-downs between actions, the whole thing becomes remarkably clumsy. You also build up a whole library of monsters called familiars, which you can train separately, and switch between in battle, though collecting and strengthening them takes more time and effort than it should. Combined with the atrocious ally AI, fighting against anything stronger than regular enemies is a struggle.



***Ni no Kuni* certainly tries its best to be like an RPG that Hayao Miyazaki might have made.**

The HD version released on the PlayStation 3 and other platforms is actually a remake of a DS game released a year earlier, in 2010. Though obviously the graphics aren't nearly on the same level, it follows the same basic story beats, though the HD version has an extra chapter at the end. The DS version also came bundled with a hulking 376-page book, which is not only a guide, but also includes the glyphs for the magic spells, which are drawn using the touch screen. (The other versions just let you cast magic from a menu.) The battle system is also completely different, being a more traditional turn-based affair that lets you position various characters on a grid. This version was not released internationally, though both the game and the book have been fan-translated into English.


Meeting Master Pugnacius
Head for the building at the top of Goldpaw that looks like a castle!

Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom

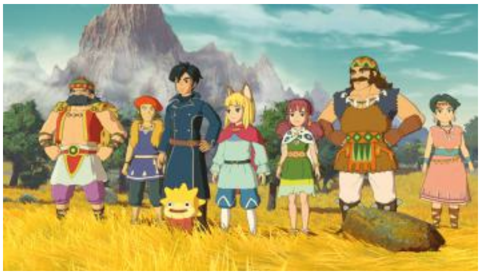
Developer: Level-5 | Released: 2018 | Platform(s): PS4, WIN

The first *Ni no Kuni* was well received, though most agreed the battle system was a low point – fix that up and you'd have a classic. But rather than taking that route, the sequel is more or less a completely different game that just takes place in the same world and has the same aesthetics. This time, the character from the real world is actually a President (seemingly of the USA) named Roland, who appears to perish in a bombing. He instead wakes up in the alternate world, finding the kingdom of Ding Dong Dell in the middle of a coup. He escapes with Evan, the child prince and rightful heir to the throne, and begins establishing a new kingdom to take back what was stolen.

Moving to more advanced platforms, *Ni no Kuni II* looks even better than its predecessor – due to Studio Ghibli's closure at the time, they weren't around to provide any animated cutscenes, but the computer-rendered visuals are so crisp that they're almost as good. Joe Hisaishi returns for the soundtrack, though it's not his best work.

The kingdom-building is the crux of *Ni no Kuni II*, particularly when comes to running sub-quests to get people to join you. In that way, it's a bit like the *Suikoden* games, but the simulation is much more advanced: you need to devote specific citizens to specific tasks, researching and crafting new items for you. However, this is not just a diversion, but rather a mandatory part of the game, and you need to reach certain goals to advance the plot. There are also army battles, in which you command units in real-time around the world map, though these aren't terribly engrossing.

The battle system has changed to a more straightforward real-time hack-and-slasher, similar to the *Tales* system. You wield multiple weapons, which can execute powerful attacks, with enough in their Zing gauges, and there are little creatures called Higgledies that will run around the field and can be used to cast powerful spells if you run over to them. The monster-collecting aspect is completely gone too. It's an overall improvement but it does feel somewhat daft.

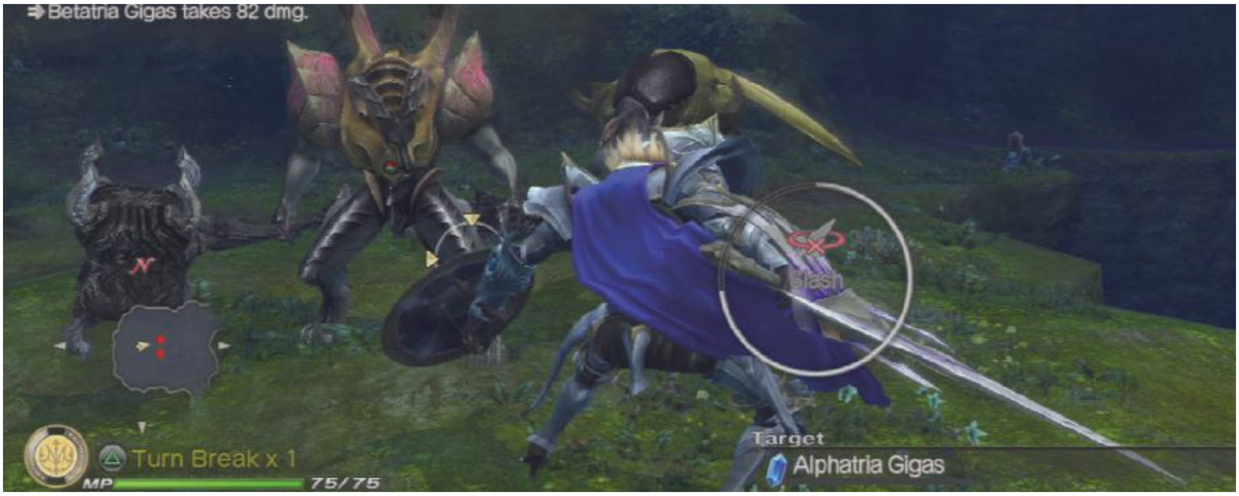


PS4
Ni no Kuni II
Revenant Kingdom

There are other issues, too. At its core, the story of Roland and Evan isn't as emotionally resonant as that of Oliver and his mother. Despite the interesting setup, the story just isn't very good, plus it's lacking a whimsical character like Drippy, and everyone is just kinda boring. Between the kingdom-building and the army battles, the adventure is filled with stuff to do, but much of it just feels like busywork; parts of the game still feel under-budgeted (like the sparse voice acting) or plain unfinished, despite its beautiful veneer. The world is still charming, with plenty of problems to solve and new locales to visit (like Goldpaw, sort of a Chinese Las Vegas, ruled by a luck goddess who decides everything with dice rolls). These aspects make up for the deficiencies elsewhere, but you can't help but feel that something is missing.

Following up this second *Ni no Kuni* game, a movie was released in Japan in 2019, telling a whole new story. Unfortunately, it was met with poor critical and commercial response.

This sequel surmises that gamers would be down with spending a good chunk of time building up their kingdom. Reactions were mixed, to say the least.



White Knight Chronicles

Developer: Sony/Level-5 | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): PS3, PSP

At the dawn of the high-definition console era, it seemed that Microsoft was the biggest supporter of Japanese RPGs. To combat this, Sony enlisted Level-5, which previously worked on its *Dark Cloud* games, to create *White Knight Chronicles*. This was intended to have a strong single player story mode, as well as a multiplayer component. Unfortunately, things didn't quite go as planned.

At the outset, you create your player avatar. However, when you play the story mode, that avatar's not the main character. Instead, you control a kid named Leonard, who works at a winery in service to the king of Balandor, while your avatar is a silent sidekick. During a banquet for the princess, the castle is attacked; Leonard stumbles upon a magical suit of armour called an Incorruptus, allowing him to transform into the 30-foot-tall White Knight of the title. Unfortunately for him, the princess gets kidnapped anyway, so he begins a journey to get her back. This opening segment rips off a common trope going back to (at least) *Mobile Suit Gundam*, in which some kid ends up in control of a superweapon, and frankly the story doesn't get any better from there.

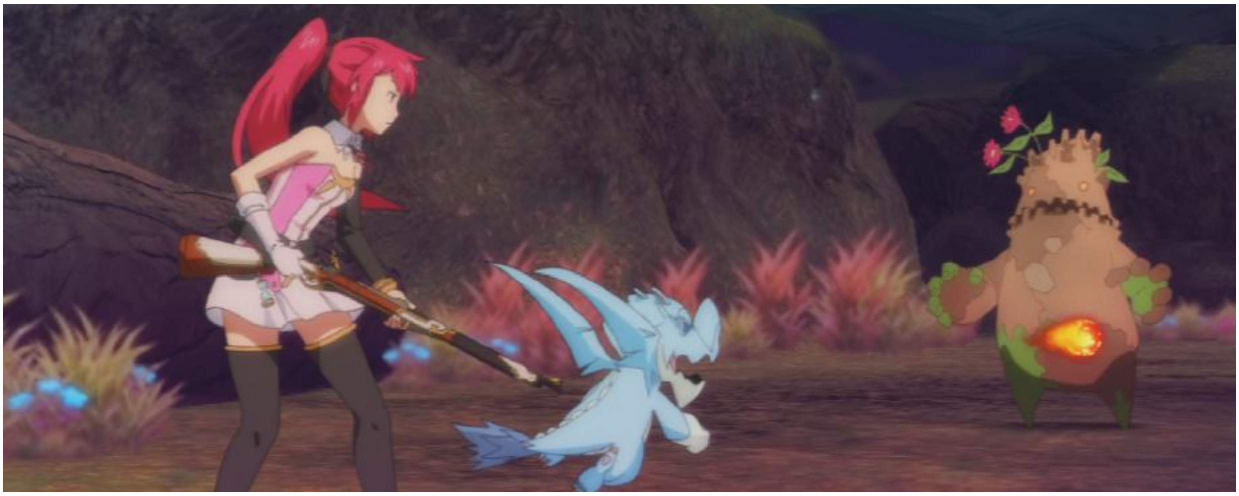
In the multiplayer mode, you do actually control your avatar, and you can run a bunch of co-op side quests, as both items and levels carry over between the online and story modes. There's also the Georama, a personal town, which is customised by the NPCs you draft into your service, roughly similar to the concept in *Dark Cloud*. Unfortunately, the servers for *White Knight Chronicles* have been dead since 2013, so even if you want to play this part of the game, you can't, though contemporary reviews point to it having been largely repetitive, but mildly enjoyable if you liked that sort of thing,

The battle system mimics MMOs, and as such plays out a bit like *Final Fantasy XII*. You control one character at a time, with a little circle that counts up, and allows you to attack when full, before resetting. You can customise and select from a wide variety of attacks, including some that can be combined together, plus you can transform into the White Knight if you really want to stomp on things. But without customisable AI like the Gambit system, or staggering effects, as seen in *Xenoblade*, it ends up being pretty boring. Additionally, Level-5 had previously been known for their outstanding visuals in games like *Rogue Galaxy* and *Dragon Quest VIII*. *White Knight Chronicles* has none of that, instead mimicking the most generic Western fantasy imaginable.

White Knight Chronicles was hyped up, and sold well, though many were disappointed in it. A sequel was released in 2010, though it doesn't actually fix any of the first game's major issues, and just continues the (still rather poor) story. The first game is also included in its entirety in this package, making the initial release obsolete. Altogether, there's nothing truly offensive about the games, but Level-5 obviously overextended itself with the single/multiplayer hybrid, and the end result is incredibly bland.

PS3
WHITE KNIGHT CHRONICLES

The 2006 E3 trailer showed off something far more impressive than *White Knight Chronicles* ended up being.



Time and Eternity

Developer: Imageepoch | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): PS3

Imageepoch was an ambitious company that sought to redefine the Japanese RPG, though their actual output left something to be desired. Some of the titles they developed for other companies turned out relatively well (SEGA's *7th Dragon*, Capcom's *Last Ranker*), while their own portable games (*Sol Trigger*, *Black Rock Shooter*) varied in quality. And yet the game that defines their legacy is *Time and Eternity*, their sole console game, which also just happens to be one of the most reviled RPGs on the PlayStation 3.

As the story starts, the hero Zack and the heroine Toki are about to get married. Unfortunately their wedding is crashed and Zack ends up getting killed. Toki reveals that she has the power to travel back in time, so she hops back six months to investigate. The spirit of Zack ends up going along, though he now inhabits the body of her pet dragon Drake. It's also revealed that another soul, named Towa, also lives within Toki's body. Toki is a chipper, friendly redhead, while Towa is a rather dour, cool-headed blonde.

The main gimmick is its mix of hand-drawn 2D animation with 3D rendered backgrounds. And indeed, right out of the gate, it looks incredible. RPG fans will probably be familiar with story scenes in which static portraits gab on and on, moving their lips, and changing expressions every once in a while. Here, everything looks like you're watching an anime TV series. When the game actually begins, all of the characters – Toki, Drake, and any enemies – all look like high-definition anime.

Unfortunately, this concept ended up being way too ambitious for the available budget. There are only maybe 20 actual enemies in the entire game, with tons upon tons of palette swaps. The animation when running around just doesn't look right, and everything just looks awkward.

The character illustrations were done by VOFAN, known for the *Bakemonogatari* light novel series, but in-game, as rendered by animation studio Satelight, they just look generic. The 3D environments, while nicely coloured, are also huge and empty.

This affects the battle system too, which is just one-on-one matches. They function in real time, even though the only things you can do are attacking, dodging, and jumping between short and close range combat. Again, this looks cool at first, but given the dearth of enemies, it grows old very quickly. Also, Toki and Towa switch bodies when you level up (they can also switch using certain rare items), and since their abilities are different, this proves oddly troublesome.

The game's issues go way beyond budget and design, as the story is drowning in the excesses of harem anime. Zack is perpetually making dirty comments about the girls, and he's just incredibly unlikeable. The rest of the characters are one-note archetypes. Nothing about the plot takes itself seriously, but whatever jokes it does make are rarely as funny as they think they are. Fans of this kind of comedic eechi TV show may find something to enjoy, but otherwise it really deserves its dire reputation.

PS3
Time and Eternity

***Time and Eternity* is the best kind of bad game, being earnest in its great ambitions, but it just completely flubs every aspect of them.**

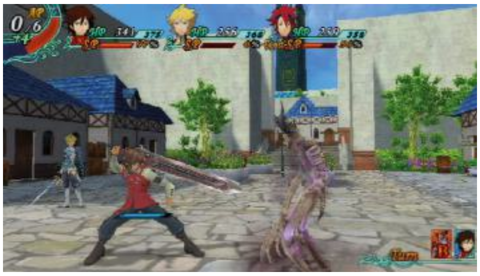
Arc Rise Fantasia

Developer: Imageepoch | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): WII

Arc Rise Fantasia begins as mercenary L'Arc Bright Lagoon of the Meridian Empire defends his country from a dragon attack by the opposing Turmelian Republic, only to be flung to the ground. He survives unscathed, thanks to a mysterious girl named Ryfia, a priestess called a Diva. His and his friends' fates are intertwined, as L'Arc and his friend Alf learn they are children of the goddess Eesa, and will shape the future of the land.

For this game, one of Imageepoch's only console releases, and one of the few JRPGs on the Wii, the company hired *Tales* writer Takumi Miyajima to provide a story similar to those in Namco's popular games. It thus has a lot of similarities, right down to the standard (but occasionally likeable) characters, the presence of optional skits, and a game world cluttered with confusing neologisms. It starts off pretty slowly, but eventually gets interesting when the party dynamics break down, but its positive features are undermined by its terrible script and hilariously bad English voice acting, which sounds like it came from a much earlier era.

Where the game deviates from *Tales* is in its battle system, which opts for more traditional, turn-based, rather than action-based, combat. Your party has a shared AP meter, and you can choose any characters to utilise during that turn as long as you have AP. If characters are moved close to each other, then they can also perform combos. Combined with an interesting customisation system, whereby you attach gems to weapons, it's easily the game's strongest element, though the boss battles tend to produce some odd difficulty spikes, even early on. It's not really compelling enough to make up for the rather bland anime stuff elsewhere though, and altogether, *Arc Rise Fantasia* is skippable.



The *Tales* games suffered from some mediocre entries during this generation, though it's not like *Arc Rise Fantasia* is much better.

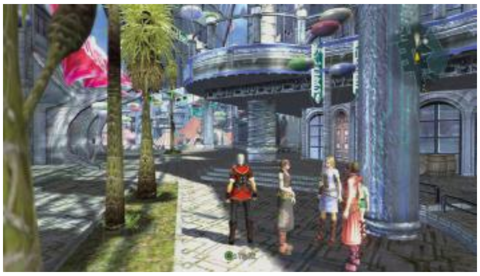
Enchanted Arms

Developer: FromSoftware | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): X360, PS3

In the distant past, humanity created enchanted golems and used them as slaves, predictably causing them rebel in a massive war. Things have calmed down in the intervening years, until an earthquake causes most of the golems to go mad. It's up to Atsuma, who has an enchanted right arm, along with his group of friends, to fight back.

Enchanted Arms was a launch-window game for the Xbox 360, and it shows – the character models aren't bad, but the rest of the game looks like an HD PS2 title. The battle system divides friends and enemies onto separate 3 × 4 grids, with each character having limited movement range on their own side, and can hit the other side using assorted attacking moves of different ranges. It's fun at first, but grows tiresome as the game goes on, especially due to its terrible battle theme. Thankfully, the auto-attack and fast-forward buttons make things a little smoother. Beyond the human characters, you can also create and collect golems to fight alongside you.

The game was developed by FromSoftware, at this point known primarily for the hardcore *King's Field* games, but this is more general fare. Despite the standard JRPG trappings, there's quite a bit of campiness. In the tutorials, characters explain basic concepts to Atsuma like he's an idiot (because he kind of is). One of the main characters, Makoto, is a flamboyant gay stereotype who attacks enemies by wailing on a saxophone. Many of the golems are flat out ridiculous, especially the pizza golem, who requests that you eat his face if you get hungry. Plus there are references to other FromSoftware games like *Otogi* and *Metal Wolf Chaos*. The off-kilter sense of humour, reminiscent of the *Shadow Hearts* games, at least keeps things amusing, though the game is otherwise painfully average.



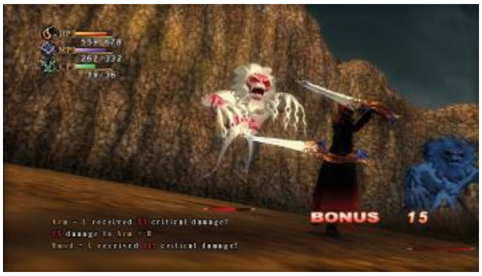
***Enchanted Arms*' occasionally silly sense of humour saves it from being a bland experience.**

Last Rebellion

Developer: Hit Maker | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): PS3

Last Rebellion will forever be known as the game then-president of NIS America, Haru Akenaga, apologised for localising in 2010 due to its poor quality. Should you choose to play it, you'll likely feel the apology was warranted – despite some interesting ideas, it's a mess of a game and would also be developer Hit Maker's final release before its bankruptcy in 2014. (Its previous games, the PSP RPG *Blade Dancer* and the DS RPG *A Witch's Tale*, were only slightly better.)

Shortly after the game begins, protagonist Nine Asfel is betrayed and murdered by his brother Alfred, who also kills their kingly father, before fleeing to put his remaining machinations into motion. Nine is saved by the mysterious Aisha Romandine, who casts a spell to bind his soul to hers, and the two embark on a mission to get revenge on Alfred and discover his true intentions. The story is ultimately let down by its weak writing and low budget – cutscenes use only still images to convey dialogue, many elements are poorly explained, and it's hard to sympathise with Nine since he's an unrepentant jerk the whole way through.



The battle system is the most interesting, albeit imperfect, part of *Last Rebellion*, resembling that of *Xenosaga 2* in particular. Each foe you face has multiple body parts that can be targeted, and the key to victory is finding the correct order to attack them. Doing so increases the damage caused, and marks foes with stamps, which are required to cast powerful magic. To permanently defeat a fallen foe, Aisha must Seal them before they get back up. The story ties into the gameplay as well, since Nine and Aisha share the same body and thus share one current status at all times, but it still doesn't make a good game.

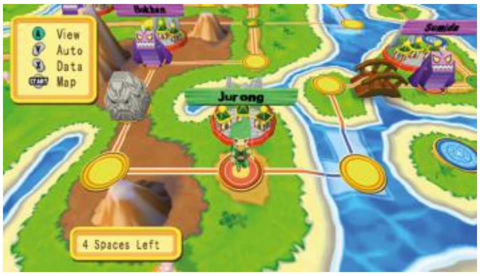
PS3
Last Rebellion

The most generous interpretation of *Last Rebellion* is that it was a PSP title shoved last-minute onto an HD console, which would explain its poor visuals, but doesn't excuse its many other issues.

Dokapon Kingdom

Developer: Sting | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): WII, PS2

Ever since video games came to be, there have been friendship-ending ones. Competing for top score in the arcade, or screwing over friends in party games, would break many bonds. Yet there is one that stands above the rest in this respect. *Dokapon Kingdom,* a remake of *Dokapon 3-2-1: Arashi o Yobu Yuujou* for the Super Famicom, was developed by Sting Entertainment and released on the PS2 and Wii to indifferent reviews. It was pretty unusual for the time, being a hybrid of a multiplayer board game and an RPG. However, it would find an audience on the Wii, and become a cult classic on the console. It is a charming combination of RPG standbys, such as levelling and changing classes, random encounters and battles, epic albeit very silly storytelling, with the board game style movement and map design normally seen in party board games. Most of what makes *Dokapon* notorious for causing interpersonal strife involves the party mode, in which players compete to have the highest income. Fighting one another allows you to play pranks, such as changing a player's name, stealing their items or towns, or giving them an embarrassing haircut.



Combat in *Dokapon Kingdom* is fairly simple, beginning with a choice of cards that determines whether you go first or second, followed by three to four combat options, each with a probability of effectiveness. Your stats affect which actions you can take, except for Strike, the all or nothing attack that can be the difference between taking out an enemy or rival player quickly, and getting countered and almost always instantly dying.

Dokapon Kingdom was produced by Shinichi Suzuki, which would go on to produce classics such as *Persona 4*, *Etrian Odyssey III: The Drowned City*, and *Code of Princess*.

Wii
DOKAPON KINGDOM
ATLUS

The *Dokapon* series, originally Japan-only Super Famicom games, was then published by Asmik Ace; these later releases were the first time they made it overseas.

Riviera: The Promised Land

Developer: Sting | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): WSC, GBA, PSP

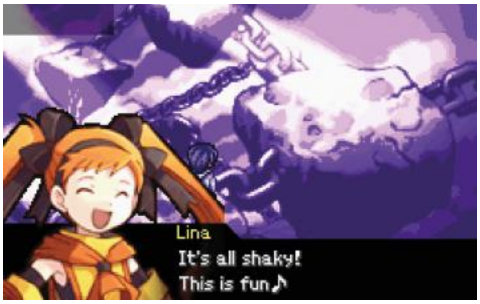
Sting Entertainment was formed in 1989 by ex-Compile employee Takeshi Santou, and dipped its toes into the RPG pool with Super Famicom games like *Solid Runner* and *Treasure Hunter G*, as well as the dark 3D Rogue-like *Baroque*. But it was *Riviera* that defined the company's output through most of the early 2000s. Directed by Shinichi Ito, it began the *Dept. Heaven* series, a shared universe of games with similar art styles and offbeat game mechanics.

Drawing loosely upon Norse mythology, the story begins a thousand years ago, by recounting the battle of Ragnarok. The good guys won, and turned the evil land of Utgard into a paradise, renaming it Riviera in the process. Back in the present, Riviera prospers, but the Magi of the council, believing it to be contaminated, send two Grim Angels, Ein and Ledah, to destroy it. During this mission, Ein is knocked out, and awakens within Riviera, which is populated by various fairies, sprites, and lots and lots of girls. Although Ein has lost his memory, he still vows to protect the land and its inhabitants, while fighting against his misguided former partner, who still seeks to destroy it.

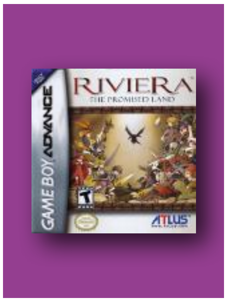
Riviera technically qualifies as an RPG, although it's really more a visual novel with occasional interspersed fights. You never directly control your character's movement, as exploration is menu-based, and you simply choose to move forward or backward, with occasional forks in the path. All of Ein's compatriots are female, which allows for all kinds of romantic high-jinks. As in SEGA's *Sakura Wars* series, there are vague dating sim elements, as each female has an affection rating towards Ein, which will change depending on how you treat her.

Every fight is preordained, and the game is very polite in letting you experiment, as you're given the option to retry without penalty if you lose. The battle system is unusual, in that you're only allowed to take four items into a fight, including weapons and healing items like potions. Once battle begins, you simply pick one of your four items and the chosen character uses it. Your party members have different affinities with different weapons, and repeated use is the only way to level up your characters and unlock special attacks, though weapons have limited durability. (If you want to level up your characters, you can re-fight past battles without worrying about consumables.) A Rage meter will also build up, eventually allowing you to use a flashy super attack. The visuals are quite impressive for a 2D game, and the soundtrack is excellent as well, with a number of battle songs.

The attack animations are overly long and unskippable, and by nature fairly repetitive, but the game's unusual enough that it's worth a go. Games with harem-like elements were also rare when the game was released in English by Atlus, in 2005. The game originally came out in Japan for the Wonderswan Color, being remade for the GBA, then later ported to the PSP, with enhanced visuals and sound, and full voice acting.



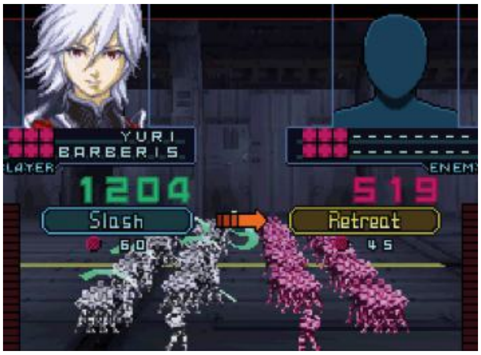
Lina
It's all shaky!
This is fun♪



***Riviera* strips out most of the exploration and grinding typical of JRPGs, and replaces it with a unique battle system, as well as a small brigade of cute girls to aid the hero, Ein.**

Infinite Space

Developer: Nude Maker | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): DS



INFINITE SPACE
NINTENDO DS
SEGA

Infinite Space's credits are strange, to put it mildly. It was made by Nude Maker, a studio of accomplished developers from Human Entertainment and the *Clock Tower* series, who are mostly known these days for the janky *NightCry*, work on the *Steel Battalion* series, and producing two porn visual novels for notable adult publisher Elf. One of those games was a new entry in a Human Entertainment franchise called *Mikagura Shoujo Tanteidan*, mystery stories that now include a full-on smut entry. Platinum Games also helped develop *Infinite Space*. You know, the people behind *Bayonetta* and *MadWorld*, the former a more horny *Devil May Cry*, and the latter a grindhouse brawler that lets you stab sign posts through the heads of your enemies as a basic attack. This is absolutely the strangest group of people to have ever made an RPG, and the most surprising part is that it's one of the best you'll find on the DS.

Its solid story follows a young boy named Yuri as he leaves his backwater planet to become a Zero-G Dog and explore space. Complications ensue, as he becomes entangled in labyrinthine political conflicts. Much of the gameplay is either visual novel scenes, in which you get to make dialog choices and various other binary decisions, participation in fleet battles that also let you board enemy ships, or customisation of both ship and crew. The first is what you'd expect, but the other modes are much more inventive.

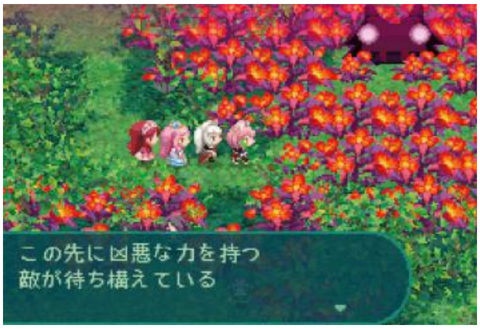
The battle system uses an action bar, the three tiers of available actions depleting it to different extents. You can do basic, accurate attacks at low cost; fire a barrage that does massive damage, at the risk of lower accuracy or being dodged; dodge a barrage yourself, leaving you open to regular attacks; or use special skills that range from shields to deadly super-barrages. You can also move in close to board an enemy ship with your crew, which turns into a rock-paper-scissors fight, in which crew numbers on each side determine the side's available health.

Ship customisation is the game's greatest strength, as you can create a fleet of varied ships, gaining bonuses by assigning various rooms to each one. You can also pick your crew roster from your growing collection of characters who can serve different roles in the fleet, like artillery expert or chef, for further bonuses. You feel like a full-on space captain, and despite the game's awkward difficulty spikes, where you need to master a particular mechanic or battle strategy to move on, the whole package creates an experience unlike anything else on the system. Add in the great character art and the absolutely wild turns of the story, and *Infinite Space* has stood the test of time as one of the most experimental and entertaining JRPGs of its era. It even came with multiplayer battle options via local wi-fi. It's quite the package, even if the final hours rush to the climax far too suddenly.

***Infinite Space* has a steep learning curve for sure, but once you get into it, it becomes one of the most engrossing experiences on the DS.**

7th Dragon (series)

Developer: Imageepoch/SEGA | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): DS, PSP, 3DS



この先に凶悪な力を持つ
敵が待ち構えている

NINTENDO DS
7DRAGON

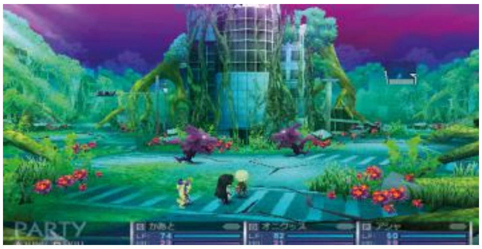
***7th Dragon* got its start as basically *Etrian Odyssey* minus the first-person dungeon crawling, though it's evolved quite a bit since then.**

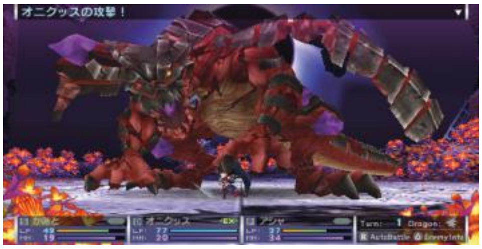
SEGA's *7th Dragon* trilogy was the company's primary portable RPG series during the DS and PSP era. It was produced by the legendary Rieko Kodama, her first RPG since *Skies of Arcadia Legends* back in 2002, and was directed by Kazuya Niinou, who had defected from Atlus. The DS and PSP entries were developed by Imageepoch; after its closure, SEGA took over development for the 3DS entry.

Niinou was primarily known for helming the *Etrian Odyssey* series of dungeon crawlers, and much of their spirit is carried forward into *7th Dragon*. However, perhaps the developers realised that first-person dungeon crawlers were always a niche thing, so *7th Dragon* more closely resembles an 8-bit RPG, à la *Dragon Quest*. At the outset, you assemble your party members from the seven character classes – Fighter, Knight, Samurai, Mage, Healer, Princess, and Rogue. Each of these has up to four different designs, two male (except for the Princess) and two female, and some of them can be made into a cat-like race called Luciers. Through much of the game, these are represented in an impossibly cute, super-deformed art style, with illustrations provided by an artist named Mota. The skill system is imported more or less directly from *Etrian Odyssey*, so that levelling up gives you points to put into improving your stats or powering up class-specific skills, And the music is provided by luminary Yuzo Koshiro, who offers both a modern soundtrack and a NES-style rendition.

There are two key elements to the game – the first of which, obviously, is the dragons. In the corner of the bottom screen, there's a counter that shows how many of the creatures remain in the world – it begins at 666 – and your goal is to slaughter all of them. Though most battles are random encounters, dragons are visible on the map, and you can choose to fight, or to run from them. (They can also intrude on standard fights if they're close enough.) This might seem like the FOE encounters from *Etrian Odyssey*, but while those were super-difficult boss fights that were meant to be avoided until you were strong enough to take them on, here they function more like mini-boss battles. In other words, not as tough as the big guys, but also putting up more of a fight than standard foes. But, however initially gratifying it is when you take one down and see the counter drop, this particular gimmick doesn't really hold up in the long run, since there are only so many types of dragon. As such, they end up becoming tedious.

The other major element takes the form of poisonous red-and-orange flowers called Furowaro (termed Dragonsbane in the official localisation of the final game). These appear on the field and are poisonous, sapping energy from your squad as you tromp over them. However, these plants are everywhere, and while certain class skills can mitigate their damage, they're still a drain on your resources, and do little but cause annoyance.




オニクッスの攻撃！

The familiar structures of post-apocalyptic Tokyo give *7th Dragon 2020* a bit of a *Shin Megami Tensei* vibe.

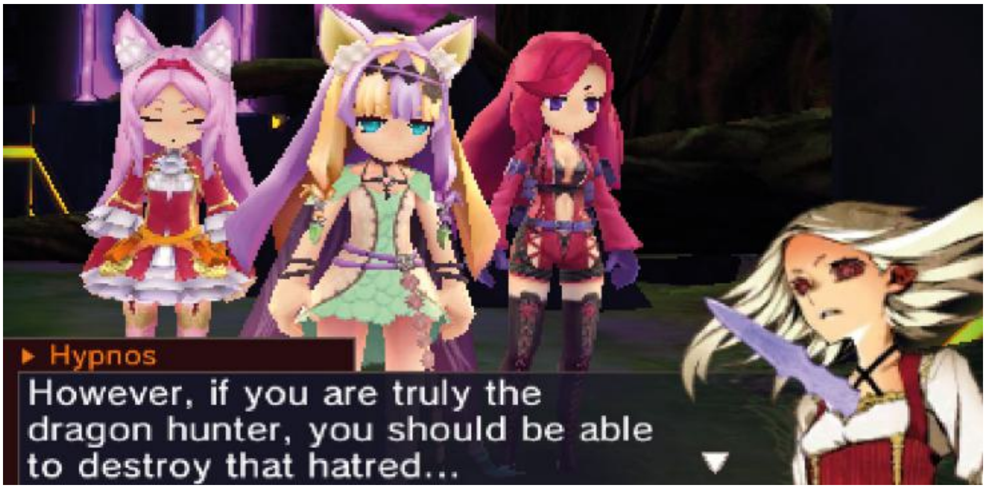
The second entry in the series, *7th Dragon 2020* on the PSP, moved away from a fantasy setting to a post-apocalyptic one. Here, you control a squadron of heroes called Murakumo 13 as they explore various real-life locations in Tokyo and fight off more dragons. The visuals are now fully 3D, and the character illustrations were assigned to manga artist Shirow Miwa. The character classes have been reworked to have more of a modern street flair, though the number has been reduced from seven to five, the number of avatars decreased from 32 to 10, and you can only have three members in combat rather than four. Perhaps to compensate, there are tons of voices to choose from, from a number of famous voice actors, though since the characters don't have any actual dialogue, these are just used for battle yells and such. Classes like the Samurai and Destroyer are familiar, while new ones, like the Hacker and Psychic, make use of the futuristic setting.

The customisation feels stripped back, but at the same time, the developers also recognised the flaws of the original – the poison flowers are still everywhere but they're only there for story purposes and don't actually affect your health, and the number of dragons has been decreased to 200. There's also a base-building aspect, as defeated dragons will earn you currency called Dz, which can be used to improve your damaged headquarters. Yuzo Koshiro returns for the soundtrack, which is in much more of an electronic style. The retro music has been replaced with an alternate version featuring vocaloid sensation Hatsune Miku.

7th Dragon 2020-II is one of those expansion pack sequels which reuses most of the original assets while technically providing a new story. The only major addition is the Idol character class, which can sing songs to provide various buffs, plus a return of the Lucier race that was missing from the first *7th Dragon 2020*.

Up to this point, SEGA hadn't released any of these titles outside of Japan. However, they did localise the third and final game in the series, *7th Dragon III: VFD*, released for the 3DS. This game tries to unite the stories of the DS and PSP entries by inserting time travel into the mix, and works overtime to explain everything to new players.

This third entry finally takes everything that worked about the previous games, refines it, and ends up as a pretty decent final product. There are eight character classes, many with unique skills, like the Duelist, who draws cards every turn that can be used for elemental magic or to activate Traps, or the hulking Banisher, who attacks with a gigantic, explosive spear. The visuals are gorgeous, despite the low resolution of the 3DS screen, and by expanding the range of locales beyond Tokyo, there are plenty of gorgeous new areas to explore, especially in the aquatic-themed realm of Atlantis. The overarching story focuses on the seven "True" Dragons, and since this is meant to be the end of the series, it does its best to finish up all of the plot threads, so everything comes together to form a satisfying whole.


▸ Hypnos
However, if you are truly the dragon hunter, you should be able to destroy that hatred...

***7th Dragon* features the Lucier race, which is an excuse to stick in anime cat girls. Pictured left is *7th Dragon III: VFD*, the only game in the series to be officially localised.**

Golden Sun (series)

Developer: Camelot | Released: 2001 | Platform(s): GBA, DS

What is it, Isaac? Do you still think about the accident?

GAME BOY ADVANCE
Golden Sun
E

After dipping a toe into the world of traditional turn-based JRPGs with *Beyond the Beyond*, Camelot took a few years off from the genre. Their biggest releases during that period were *Shining the Holy Ark*, *Mario Golf*, and *Mario Tennis*. Their new partnership with Nintendo developed, with Camelot becoming an exclusive second-party developer for the company, and the first game created in that partnership, but not based on an existing Nintendo property, was *Golden Sun*.

Created by the Takahashi brothers, Hiroyuki and Shugo, the inaugural game in this series was released for the Game Boy Advance on 1 August, 2001 – a very early release, making it of the first big RPGs available for the GBA. Shugo once said in an interview that the game was developed as a way for Nintendo to compete with Sony, which at the time was dominating the RPG genre. It has very much the look and feel of some of Camelot's earlier games, right down to the icon-based menus.

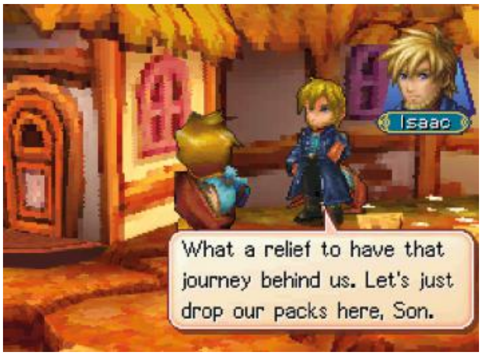
Golden Sun was initially planned as a single title, for development on the Nintendo 64. Once they realised that the N64 was well on its way out, with the GameCube incoming at the time, development shifted to the GBA. The initial release, simply called *Golden Sun* in North America and Europe but carrying the subtitle of *The Broken Seal* in Japan, took almost a year and a half to develop – an extremely long time for a handheld game, especially then.

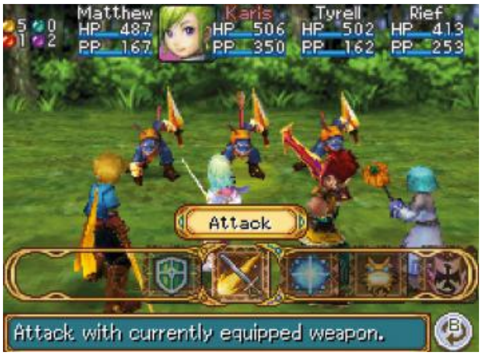
The story begins with Isaac, Garet, and Jenna, three kids from the town of Vale. Three years after a devastating storm damaged the village and is presumed to have killed Isaac's father, Jenna's brother Felix, and their parents, the trio and their mentor Kraden sneak into and explore Vale's mysterious Sol Sanctum, which is normally off-limits. Upon arriving at its innermost area, they discover the home of the Elemental Stars, which are said to be able to reignite the four Elemental Lighthouses and restore the power of Alchemy to the world. However, when Isaac and Garet try to retrieve the Stars, they are interrupted by Saturos and Menardi – two dragon-like warriors from the village of Prox – their mysterious companion Alex, and none other than a very alive Felix. Jenna and Isaac are kidnapped, three of the four Stars are taken, and Isaac and Garet are tasked with preventing the Lighthouses from being re-lit, as the restoration of Alchemy could bring the entire world to ruin.

By the end of the first title, Isaac and Garet have met up with the young mind-reader Ivan and the healer Mia, and faced off against Saturos and Menardi (among many other threats), but have ultimately failed in their duty, as both the Mercury and Venus Lighthouses are lit. However, the game ends with the party sailing off into unknown territory, hoping to stop Felix from lighting the remaining two Lighthouses.

In the second part of the story, *Golden Sun: The Lost Age* (which was released in mid-2002 in Japan and in 2003 in America and Europe), the

***Golden Sun* is one of the best original RPGs on the Game Boy Advance, and decades later, fans are still clamouring for its representation in *Super Smash Bros.* (though that can be said of pretty much any Nintendo franchise).**


Isaac
What a relief to have that journey behind us. Let's just drop our packs here, Son.



NINTENDO DS
Golden Sun
DARK DAWN

The third game in the series, *Dark Dawn,* shifts the visuals into 3D, though it suffers in other areas.

player takes control of Felix, with the explicit goals of lighting the Jupiter and Mars Lighthouses and restoring alchemy. Felix – along with Jenna, the young but powerful Sheba, and the mysterious Piers, plus NPC Kraden – aims to complete Saturos and Menardi's original task. As well as knowing that Isaac's party will stand in his way, Felix must contend with more Proxian warriors, Agatio and Karst – the latter of whom is Menardi's sister, who is bent on revenge. Midway through the story, the party learns that the sealing away of Alchemy has doomed the world of Weyard at large; while the power was used for evil by some, it was sustaining the land, and its absence means that the world will eventually end if nothing is done. Isaac's party eventually joins Felix's quest, after learning the truth behind the Lighthouses, and the Jupiter and Mars beacons are fired once more, restoring alchemy's power.

The credits sequence of *The Lost Age* reveals that Alex was masterminding many of the story's events, with the personal goal of receiving the pure power of Alchemy for himself. When all four lighthouses are lit, their respective powers gather at the top of Mt. Aleph in an event known as the Golden Sun; Alex receives this power, but his fate is left uncertain after he proves to be no match for the god known as the Wise One.

In *Golden Sun: Dark Dawn,* which was released in late 2010 for the Nintendo DS, the player is put into the shoes of Matthew, Isaac's son. In a story taking place 30 years after the events of *The Lost Age,* Matthew and other descendants of the original party must navigate a world that has been significantly altered by the return of Alchemy, fighting against an ancient and terrible power as well as against new and dangerous Adepts (the game's term for people who can use the power of Psynergy).

All three games feature the same kind of gameplay: battles are randomised, there are some interesting puzzles to solve in dungeons, and the story is generally very linear. Carrying over from *Beyond the Beyond,* Camelot used a rotating battle camera, which not only increases the drama for basic attacks but helps give many of the Psynergy effects an extra dramatic punch. Even on the Game Boy Advance it's an impressive effect, in spite of the pixelated visuals. It doesn't quite have the same punch in 3D in the DS entry.

The party is made up of four different kinds of Adept: Venus (earth magic), Mars (fire magic), Jupiter (wind magic), and Mercury (water magic). Each Adept has an inherent type, though these can be customised by the use of the four different types of elemental Djinn. Djinn are creatures that can be found and added to the party member's roster, either through solving puzzles or by defeating one in a battle. A Djinni will generally boost a party member's stats and can grant them access to new abilities. They can also be used in battle as an attack, with each Djinni having a different in-battle effect. Djinn can also be used to summon powerful beings that can do a lot of damage. Available Psynergy can be customised by giving a party member a Djinni of a different type – a Venus adept can use certain fire attacks if given a Mars Djinni, for example.

The creative team across all three games was consistent, with the direction and design handled by the Takahashi brothers, character design and art from Shin Yamanouchi (who had worked on *Shining the Holy Ark* and many *Mario Golf* and *Mario Tennis* entries), and music from Motoi Sakuraba (whose prolific career includes the *Tales* games, *Dark Souls,* and many others, in addition to the *Shining* games for Camelot).

Golden Sun and *The Lost Age* were critically hailed upon their GBA release, with many pointing out the high quality of the graphics (especially many of the battle effects), challenging puzzles, and engaging story. The perspective switch between the two halves of the story was also lauded as being an interesting twist in the overall tale. *Dark Dawn* was also generally well-received, though not quite as favourably as the first two, largely because it was watered-down in terms of both the difficulty and the overall story. All the games suffer from an overabundance of wordiness, with dialogue that drags on far longer than necessary, especially in *Dark Dawn.* Due in large part to the fact that *Dark Dawn* was released very late in the DS's life cycle, it also performed the worst commercially.

The franchise has garnered a strong cult following in the years since it first arrived on the GBA, but in spite of *Dark Dawn* ending on a literal "The End...?" cliffhanger screen, there has been no indication from Nintendo or Camelot of a fourth game on the horizon.

Bravely Default (series)

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): 3DS, NSW

SQUARE ENIX
BRAVELY DEFAULT
NINTENDO 3DS

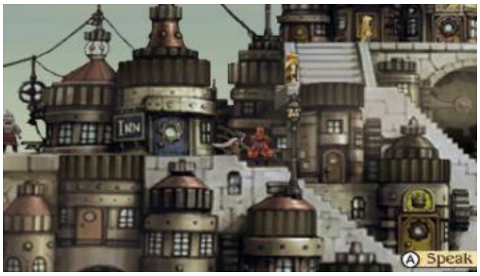
After the DS remakes of *Final Fantasy III* and *IV*, producer Tomoya Asano attempted an original classic-style *Final Fantasy* game with the spinoff *The 4 Heroes of Light*. While this was met with a middling reception, the idea was polished and revisited with *Bravely Default*, released for the 3DS. The story is, again, classic *Final Fantasy* – there are four elemental crystals that govern the realm of Luxendarc, but something has affected them, causing various natural disasters. The adventurers include Agnès, a vestal of the Wind Crystal, who ventures through the rest of the land to awaken the others; Tiz, a shepherd whose town was annihilated by an earthquake; Edea, a soldier for the nefarious Duchy of Eternia, who betrays her country to join your mission; and Ringabel, a ladies' man who has amnesia, but also a journal that seemingly foretells the future.

While *The 4 Heroes of Light* was basically an old-school RPG with modern graphics, *Bravely Default* instead takes the themes and mechanics of classic *Final Fantasy* and updates them for the 21st century. This affects how the characters are written – they are certainly *Final Fantasy* archetypes, but there is much more dialogue than in the older games, which fleshes out their personalities. The scenario was written by Naotaka Hayashi, famous for visual novels like *Steins;Gate*. The characters tend to be exaggerated stereotypes, but these really work here, making the characters likeable, especially by giving them catchphrases (Agnés' haughty "unacceptable") or verbal tics (Edea's "mrgrgr" mumblings). There are even optional Party Talk segments, similar to the skits in the *Tales* games, where the characters converse about current events.

The battle system is set up as in the 16-bit *Final Fantasy* games, with a side-view camera that only switches angles when someone attacks, rather than the more dynamic cameras found in the 32-bit games. The main gimmick here, and the source of the rather unusual title, is in the Brave and Default commands. By selecting Brave, you can act again in a single turn, up to four times, by sacrificing Brave Points. Conversely, selecting Default will allow you defend for one turn in return for an extra Brave Point to be cashed in later. You're allowed to go into debt, with negative Brave Points, but that also means you need to sit out several subsequent turns until you can act again. This allows for a good balance between aggression and defence, plus enemies can take advantage of it too, particularly bosses. There are also Special moves unique to each weapon type, which have various trigger conditions – you can customise these moves to an extent, plus they also offer a party-wide stat boost for a short period of time. Though it can be tweaked, the default difficulty level is relatively high, but it is also remarkably player-friendly, in ways the 16-bit JRPGs weren't – you can whizz through fights using turbo speed, the game autosaves regularly, and while it features random battles, their frequency can be tweaked, and even turned off altogether.

The Job system has been taken more or less directly from *Final Fantasy V*, with you taking

***Bravely Default* would be an instant classic that almost effortlessly replicated the glory days of 16-bit RPGs … except the repetitive second part of the game brings it down.**



There aren't many towns in *Bravely Default*, but the ones that do exist are presented as paintings in motion.

on various classes and gaining job points to level these up, and allowing you to carry over skills to other Jobs. There are the usual *Final Fantasy* standbys – Monks, Black and White Mages, Dark Knights, along with some more unusual ones, like Vampires, which are alternatives to the enemy-skill-gathering Blue Mages, and Conjurers, who allow characters to greatly (but temporarily) buff their skills. Amusingly, many of the bosses, called Asterisk Holders, take on roles from these classes, and surrender their Jobs to you once defeated. Their brief appearances are also somewhat comical – the Monk is a gigantic dunderhead, while the White Mage is a femme fatale, and the Black Mage is a stuttering, nerdish misogynist.

There some elements tied into the 3DS StreetPass feature, like the ability to receive specific attacks to be used in battle, or enlist aid to re-build Norende, Tiz's destroyed hometown, which can unlock various bonuses. There is also a currency, called Sleep Points, which let you briefly pause time during battles to do whatever you want. These Points are obtained either by leaving the 3DS in sleep mode, or by purchasing them via microtransactions.

The visuals are similar to those in the DS *Final Fantasy* games, with characters drawn in the cutesy style of Akihiko Yoshida. The most impressive aspect is the towns, which are presented like paintings that have been given three-dimensional depth. The soundtrack is by Revo, the composer for the metal opera band Sound Horizon, and uses live instruments. While markedly different in style from most of Square's other game music, it nails all of the key points of a JRPG soundtrack – a beautiful overworld theme, diverse town tunes, moody but melodic dungeon tracks, and some brilliantly rocking battle pieces, particularly character-specific themes when special moves are triggered.

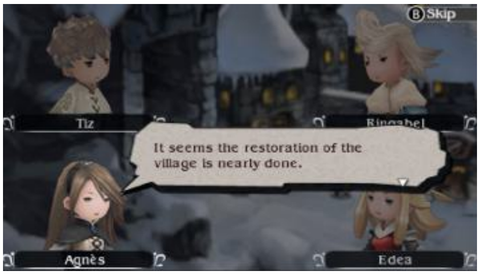
For most of *Bravely Default*'s playtime, it gets almost everything right. Unfortunately, things come crashing down after the fourth chapter, due to a plot twist that basically resets the story. While you get to keep your powers and abilities, you need to revisit the four crystals, and defeat the main bosses … then do it again, and again, and again, before you can finally get to the finale. Granted, you don't need to go through the entire story during each cycle, plus the boss fights are different, and there are some added bits of story, but it still adds several extra unnecessary hours onto the game. It's a frustrating decision that mars *Bravely Default*'s legacy.

The sequel, *Bravely Second*, was released two years later, and focuses on what happens after Tiz and crew saved the world. However, things are going quite badly as the game starts, as Agnés, now given the title of Pope, has been captured by the evil kaiser. It's up to her bodyguard, Yew, who is quickly joined by Edea, to save her. Being a direct sequel, it really is necessary to have beaten the first game to really enjoy this, and its main draw is in how the world has changed.

This sequel reuses many locations from the first game, though the story is pretty good, and it's missing the time-looping nonsense of the first game. The battle system hasn't really changed, but there are a whole slew of new jobs, including the Catmancer, another variation of a Blue Mage that gives your character cutesy cat ears and requires cat food to learn abilities; the Hawkeye, basically a sharpshooting cowboy (or cowgirl); and the Patissier, who creates deadly desserts for their foes. The only downside is the soundtrack, provided by ryo, of the vocaloid group supercell, which is a huge step down from the original.

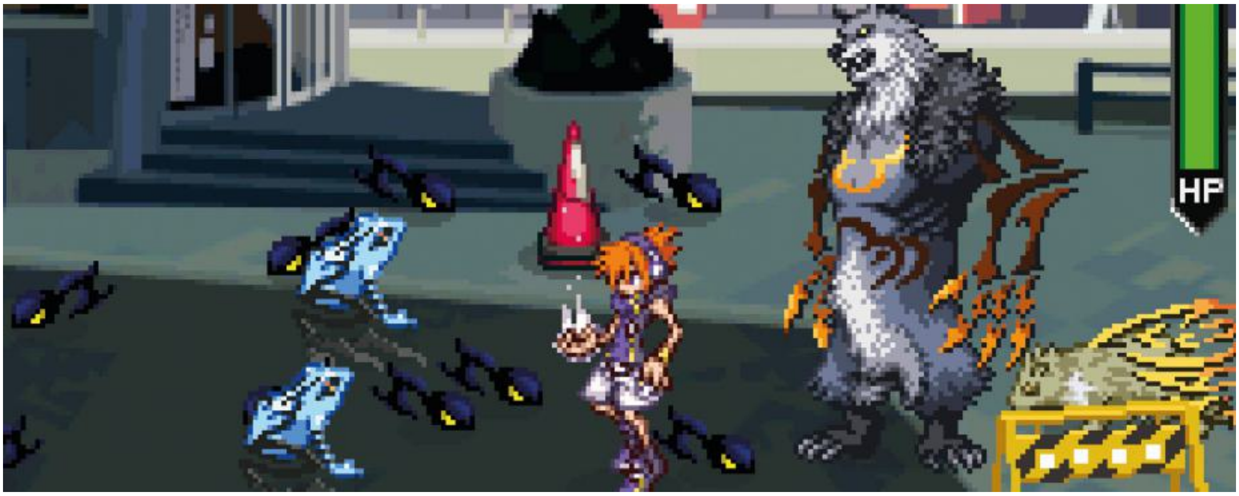
The series continued onward with *Bravely Default II* for the Switch, featuring a new set of characters and bringing back Revo as the composer.

Attack with the equipped weapon.



It seems the restoration of the village is nearly done.

The dialogue is a bit different from that in the older *Final Fantasy* games, a bit goofier in spots.



The World Ends With You

Developer: Square Enix/Jupiter | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): DS, NSW

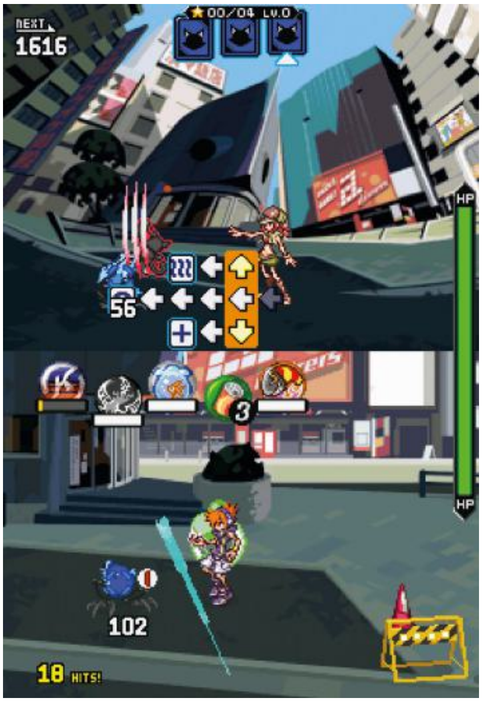
The World Ends With You (*TWEWY*), known as *Subarashiki Kono Sekai* ("This Wonderful World") in Japanese, is one of the most innovative RPGs Square Enix was ever involved in. A boy named Neku Sakuraba has recently died, and is stuck in a week-long game that gives him a second chance at life. This limbo is contained entirely within Shibuya City district of Tokyo, where he's a sort of ghost, aware of the many people in the crowds, and able to read their minds, but unable to interact with them. However, there are other people in the same situation, and Neku is forced to partner up with one of these. The limbo game is run by a group of beings called Reapers, who manipulate abstract monsters called Noise in order to destroy the trapped souls.

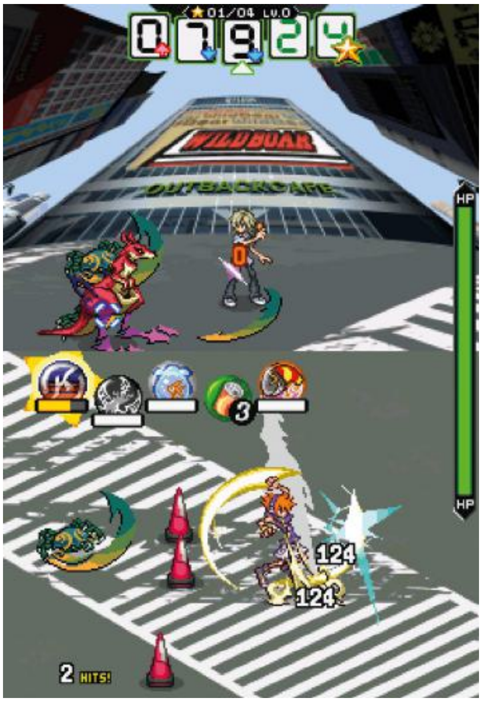
On one level, *TWEWY* is a long demonstration of just what the DS is capable of, containing an incredibly experimental battle system that has you controlling two different characters at the same time, on two different screens. During combat, Neku is controlled on the touch screen, while you perform certain strokes or use the mic to activate any of the Pins you've equipped, which enable attacks and support moves (electrocution, fire, psychic moves to fling around bits of scenery, etc.) Your partner, on the other hand, is controlled on the top screen, with the direction-pad, using a card-based system that grants stars when certain combos are achieved. These combos change, depending on your partner – with one, you have to match them, while another needs you to input a proper math equation, and so on. With enough stars, you can then use a fusion attack that damages everything on both screens, and puts you up to level three. The rhythm of your attacks will also pass a green light-puck between the characters, giving damage bonuses to the one who has it.

"Free Spain Hill from the Noise.
"You have 200 minutes. Fail, and face erasure. —The Reapers"

While you have the option to use a computer-controlled partner, nailing down this strange system to create a strong battle rhythm really shows just how fleshed-out and exciting this system is. It even fits into the game's larger theme of communication, making your characters share a life bar, while you're both fighting the exact same enemies at the same time, simply whittling down their health together on two separate planes. Thankfully, you don't have to worry about moving the partner character, just timing dodges or blocks, which keeps the system from being too complicated. It's a very customisable experience, allowing the player to tailor it to themselves, including the ability to decide your max health and the number of enemies you fight at once. In order to become stronger, taking on more riskier fights is encouraged, granting larger rewards. The effectiveness of Neku's Pins is also dictated by the fashion trends in each section of Shibuya, though these can change based on your Pin usage in battle. This also goes for items and clothing, changing how many bonuses they offer. There's even a system that grants ability enhancements based on eating (and digesting) various types of food.

It takes quite a while to wrap your head around the partner fighting mechanic, but the game eases you into it by letting you pick your difficulty level, and how automated you want to make your partner.





Most DS games didn't use the two screens for much, other than adding in maps or other kinds of trivial gimmick, but it's an essential part of *The World Ends With You*, and it feels like something is missing in the ports that combine everything onto one screen.

Just about every system in the game feeds back into every other, including the ability to upgrade your Pins through the DS' Streetpass wi-fi capabilities.

The game radiates the style of Tetsuya Nomura, the creative force behind the *Kingdom Hearts* series. However, alongside his vague "creative producer" role, his main contribution was the character designs. Nomura was not an insignificant part of the game, but he was far from the most important voice on the project. This may be why *The World Ends With You* is one of the strongest works with Nomura's clear creative stamp, as there was a staff around to contextualise his wilder ideas in a much more coherent and thoughtful manner than was done in his other games. It's true that the modern street fashion, hip user interface, and catchy J-rock music (much of which was actually dubbed well into English for the international release) are a huge part of the appeal, but the aesthetic is not merely skin deep.

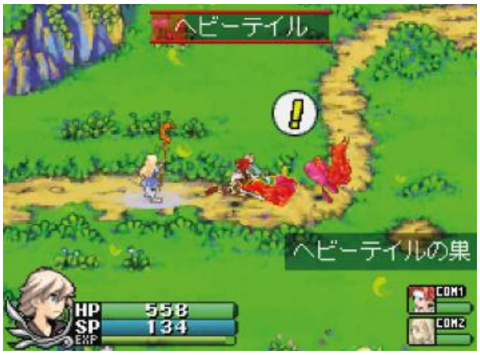
The story here is a strong one, about the bonds people form with each other and how these can change them, for better or worse. It portrays this through conflict between the characters' worldviews, the anti-social Neku being forced to confront the views of others and integrate their truths with his own, gaining perspective. In the first week of the game, he is paired with a girl roughly his age, named Shiki. He is so emotionally distant that he resents her presence, but eventually learns to fight as a team. But when the duo are then separated, and Neku is granted a new partner, this highlights the bond the two were only beginning to create, and he spends the rest of the story desperately trying to get it back. It's a coming of age story, typical for a JRPG, but here it takes a more universal approach; the large cast is used to show that personal growth can always continue, and that centring your life around your own desires can be dangerous. The neighbourhood of Shibuya itself is doubly functional, as aesthetic trappings and thematic support. The fashion-trends system and use of brands, clothing, and even the imprinting of memes on people map onto the core concepts of individuality and culture clash, giving the whole game a depth that you wouldn't expect at first glance.

TWEWY is an absolute must-play, but make sure it's the original DS version. The re-releases for smartphones and the Switch combine everything onto a single screen, and try to simplify the battle system by turning partners into Pins, removing one of the most unique parts of the game. The touch controls just don't work as well as the stylus on the DS screen either. The Switch *Final Remix* version adds an alternate control method if hooked to a TV, in which you point and aim with the Joy-Cons, but it's messy at best. It's the sort of game that really needed to be redesigned from the ground up to take regular D-pad controls into account, rather than having adapted motion controls. This port also adds an extra final chapter, though with a remarkably dumb twist, which reads like extremely bad fan-fiction.

All of that being said, while *TWEWY* was not an immediate hit, its hip style and impressively original gameplay has given it more longevity than almost any other RPG on the DS. Indeed, over a decade later in 2021, the property was resurrected for a TV anime series, as well as a brand new game called *NEO: The World Ends with You*, released for the PlayStation 4, Switch, and PCs.

Soma Bringer

Developer: Monolith Soft | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS



SOMA BRINGER
NINTENDO DS

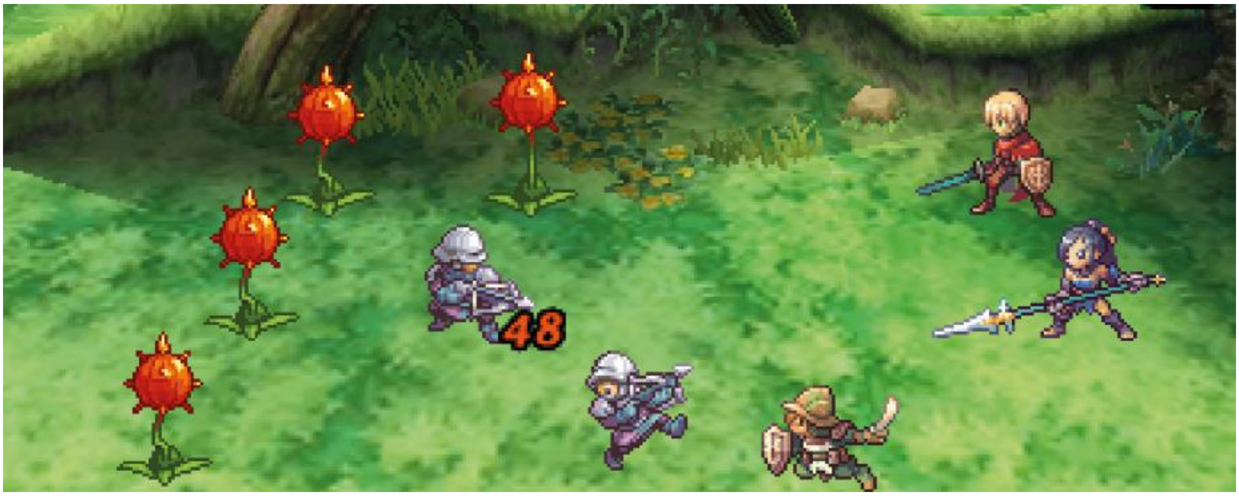
The world of *Soma Bringer* is under attack by monsters called Visitors, which have the nasty habits of possessing living creatures and causing havoc. To combat this menace, a military force called the Pharzuph is formed to combat them. Joining as part of Division 7, you explore the world to combat the Visitors, and meet an amnesiac girl named Idea. She is proficient at channelling Soma, the energy force that powers the world's technology, and together, they will uncover its mysterious origins.

Soma Bringer was developed by Monolith Soft, and published just after the company was purchased by Nintendo. It involved many of the same staff as *Xenogears, Xenosaga,* and the later *Xenoblade Chronicles*, including producer Tetsuya Takahashi and writer Soraya Saga, but it's more of an action RPG than any of those titles. At the outset, you can choose your player character, as well as their class – Battlers use mêlée weapons, Darks are dual-wielders who can sacrifice HP for various effects, Corps are holy knights with spears and shields, Somas are magicians, Gunners use projectile weapons like bows and guns, and Kampfs are martial artists. Once defined, your hero remains a silent protagonist within Division 7, though two of your comrades will follow you, either governed by AI or controlled by other players using the DS' local wi-fi connection. This makes the game feel like a successor to the *Mana* games, but it also heavily resembles PC dungeon crawlers like *Diablo*. The expansive dungeons are preset, but the loot contained within, including weapons, is randomly generated. The combat is rather button-mashy, with a strong focus on rummaging around for treasure and bashing bad guys. Upon levelling up, you can choose how you want to strengthen your protagonist, by both allocating numbers into various stats and learning and upgrading the skills associated with your class.

But the game is also much more colourful than *Diablo*, or most dungeon crawlers, using 3D characters on top of illustrated 2D backdrops, giving it a style reminiscent of the PlayStation *Final Fantasy* games. Artistically it's excellent, though the backgrounds do suffer from the low resolution of the Nintendo DS, plus the game has a tendency to zoom in on bad guys when you're attacking them, which makes the pixelation all the more apparent. Due to their large size, the dungeons grow visually repetitive as well. The music by Yasunori Mitsuda, another regular collaborator with this dev team, is beautiful as always, with the powerful instruments and stirring melodies he's consistently known for.

Nintendo didn't localise *Soma Bringer*, which was a mistake. While some may find its dungeon crawling tedious, many of its ideas were fleshed out – like the emphasis on Breaking enemies to stun them – for use in *Xenoblade*, making this game a missing link in the evolution of this company's games.

***Soma Bringer* is the evolutionary midpoint between Monolith's earlier games, like *Xenosaga*, and their later, more popular games, like *Xenoblade*.**



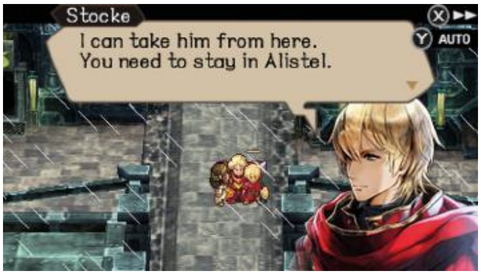
Radiant Historia

Developer: Atlus | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): DS, 3DS

The continent of Vainqueur has been consumed by war; a plague turning the landscape into sand has divided the kingdoms of Alistel and Granorg. At the centre of the story is a soldier from Alistel, named Stocke, who ends up creating a split in the timeline that leads to two drastically different outcomes for the war.

Other RPGs, like *Chrono Trigger* and *Dragon Quest VII,* have dealt with time travel, but they always involved jumping back and forth between different eras. In *Radiant Historia*, there are two timelines that run parallel to each other. Using the power of the White Chronicle, granted to him by two mysterious children, Stocke can leap between these universes at will. He can also jump backwards to previous events (though not forwards to the future). Through much of the game, you play on one timeline until you reach a roadblock, then jump to the other, where you either complete the event or obtain some kind of skill to bypass it. An in-game flow-chart maps out all of the events, including all of the spots you can jump back to. There are several important decision-making points, but rather than causing new timeline branches, there's always a "right" and "wrong" choice. Picking the latter will just give you a few lines of text detailing how you failed, before making you pick the right one.

The core story is decent, but seeing how the two timelines compare and contrast is where most of the appeal lies, especially as Stocke engages with a mysterious foe who can also jump through time. The political focus is closer to what you'd find in a strategy RPG than in a typical JRPG, and Stocke, as a military veteran, is a more interesting character than the archetypical teenage hero. The universe does have a cool steampunk veneer, as well as a cast of characters made up of both humans and beast-folk. The dramatic music by Yoko Shimomura is excellent as well, albeit a bit repetitive.


Stocke

I can take him from here.
You need to stay in Alistel.

In battle, enemies are positioned on a 3 × 3 grid. Your three active combatants have skills that can push, pull, or otherwise move your enemies around the grid. If you can toss multiple foes onto the same square, they'll all take damage if you attack it, so it requires careful planning and using everyone's skills in tandem, plus you can use skills to manipulate the turn queue in your favour. Early in the game, it's brilliant, as it's quite strategic and engaging. However, later enemies (particularly bosses) can't be pushed around, so the fights tend to drag on, causing the whole thing to lose steam. Plus, due to the time-travelling premise, you're often forced to replay sections or go through dungeons you've already explored. At least you can skip cutscenes and avoid most encounters on the map by running around enemies.

A 3DS port, subtitled *Perfect Chronology*, includes a Friendly mode in which touching an enemy will just automatically kill it. While you still need to fight boss battles, it does greatly help the pacing. It also adds redone character portraits (the original ones are DLC), full voice acting, some cool sub-quests that are tangential to the main timelines, and a new dungeon.

3DS
RADIANT HISTORIA

***Radiant Historia* seems to be a spiritual successor to the obscure 1995 Super Famicom RPG *Gran Historia*, which had a somewhat similar premise, involving a hero travelling through time to prevent disaster.**

The Legend of Legacy

Developer: Cattle Call | Released: 2015 | Platform(s): 3DS

Japanese game publisher FuRyu prompted a lot of ears to perk up in late 2014 when it revealed *The Legend of Legacy* for the Nintendo 3DS. In large part, that was because a number of artists and developers with ties to Square Enix – like *Chrono Trigger* writer Masato Kato, *Final Fantasy XIII* composer Masashi Hamauzu, and *SaGa Frontier* designer Kyoji Koizumi – had signed on to make it. Another reason: it didn't take long for this portable RPG to sound decidedly *SaGa*-ish. At the time, it'd been nearly a decade since that vaunted series had graced a console, with the last game being the PS2 remake *Romancing SaGa: Minstrel Song*. *Legacy*'s English distribution was by Atlus.

All of this begs the question: does the final product live up to all the hype that preceded its 2015 launch? Generally speaking, yes, it does. That said, even the best *SaGa* game in existence has at least a few flaws, and this rip-off is no exception. Still, *The Legend of Legacy* provides plenty of positives, too. As is true of any good *SaGa*-like, *The Legend of Legacy* lets you choose from an assortment of colourful protagonists at the start. OK, so "colourful" is a bit of a stretch when it comes to describing this game's human characters. Still, there are six of them – three guys, three girls, all seemingly Caucasian – and most are at least pleasingly designed. More interestingly, there's also a green frog prince, and he puts the rest to shame. Although each of these potential party members has their own raison d'être, don't expect your selection to impact the adventure that follows like it does in, say, *SaGa Frontier*. It mostly affects who you can and can't add to your party later on, and a few story bits along the way. Beyond its impressive cast – in terms of number, if not diversity – *The Legend of Legacy*'s main selling points are its watercolour-esque aesthetic, the pop-up aspect of its overworld (this is especially cool if you've got your system's 3D effect turned on), and its Cartograph system, which has players map out game areas for money.

Does this system make up for the fact that *The Legend of Legacy* features just one town – Initium, where the game begins – and no real overworld? Some may think so, but many will not. Many players are likely to grumble about the general lack of a story, too: it revolves around a mysterious island, on which lies an Eternity-granting artefact, and it lacks narrative direction. There's a lot going on in *The Legend of Legacy*, especially during its frequent – and frequently tough – turn-based battles, and little of it is adequately explained.

Don't let these potential pitfalls deter you from checking out *The Legend of Legacy*, if its premise intrigues you. It offers players more pros – Hamauzu's lovely soundtrack chief among them – than cons, even if the overall package is far from perfect. That said, those who prefer traditional JRPGs may want to try this game's spiritual successor, *The Alliance Alive*, instead. Not only is the latter more straightforward and accessible, but it also sports a meatier story and more appealing characters.

The *Legend of Legacy*'s publisher, FuRyu, was previously known for licensed games and the dungeon-crawling RPG *Unchained Blades*.

The Alliance Alive

Developer: Cattle Call | Released: 2017 | Platform(s): 3DS, WIN, PS4, NSW

As the follow-up to *The Legend of Legacy*, Cattle Call's *The Alliance Alive* seeks to fix most of its predecessor's faults. Although both titles share story and gameplay elements with Square Enix's long-running *SaGa* series, *The Alliance Alive*, published by FuRyu in Japan, and by Atlus elsewhere, between 2017 and 2018, is the more accessible of the two. Whereas *The Legend of Legacy* often goes out of its way to be offbeat and quirky, *The Alliance Alive* does the opposite. In fact, it's a fairly traditional, turn-based RPG at heart, but like any good *SaGa* knockoff, it bolsters all the tried-and-true stuff with some strange and intriguing systems.

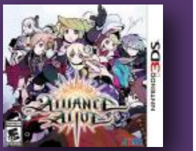
To begin with, you don't choose your protagonist, as you do in *The Legend of Legacy*. In *The Alliance Alive*, your hero is chosen for you. Predictably, it's a rather vanilla young man named Galil. He does have at least one interesting trait, though: he's part of a resistance group, the Night Ravens, which opposes the evil Daemons who've taken over his unnamed world and enslaved humanity. Thankfully, most of the 11 other characters you can add to your party while traipsing through *The Alliance Alive* have a bit more flavour. Among them are a pair of Daemon turncoats, a monocled young scientist who dons a duck-shaped power suit, and a plucky penguin warrior.

So far, so *SaGa*-esque, right? That's just the beginning. Although *The Alliance Alive* features turn-based battles, there's a lot more to them than choosing moves. You can place party members in various offensive and defensive positions and formations. You can fill up their Ignition gauges and then unleash limit break-ish final strikes. And best of all, you – or they – can randomly Awaken new skills (or Arts, as they're called in this game).

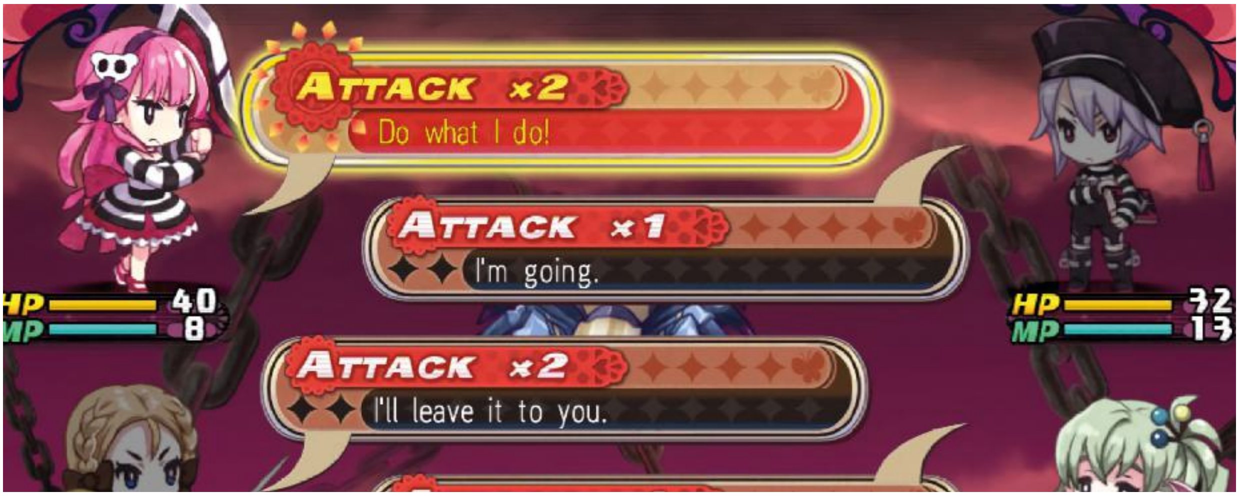
Ignace
Did I not say this would end poorly?

The Alliance Alive doesn't steal all of its best and most bizarre elements from Square Enix's oddball RPG series, however. Its guild system is a perfect example. While exploring the game's extensive map, you'll regularly encounter lofty towers. These spires support you both in and out of battle. Some develop armour, weapons, or magic-like sigils. Others decrease the number of enemies roaming an area, or launch attacks in your favour once you're engaged in a fight. This portable role-player's pièce de résistance, however, is its Water Devil Dens. These optional dungeons dot the landscape and are accessed via malevolent-looking whirlpools. As you might expect, they're teeming with nasty baddies. They also imbue *The Alliance Alive* with an otherworldly tension that's completely at odds with the "typical JRPG" mould that structures the rest of its sprawling adventure. Masashi Hamauzu's soundtrack is notably unusual, too. In particular, only special encounters employ unique battle music; regular fights continue to use whatever track is playing on the field when they start.

While *The Alliance Alive*'s initial release saw limited success, it was better received than its predecessor. In fact, it did well enough to earn *HD Remastered* ports to other platforms.



A substantial improvement over *The Legend of Legacy*, this follow-up is a nice accompaniment to Square Enix's *Bravely Default*, and might be the better choice for those who prefer *SaGa* to *Final Fantasy*.

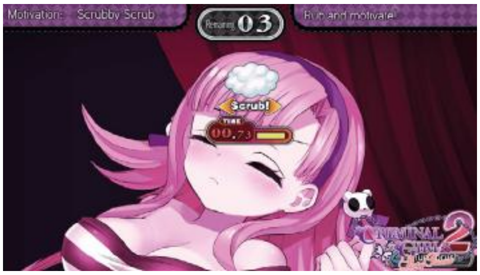


Criminal Girls (series)

Developer: Imageepoch/Nippon Ichi | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): PSP, PSV, WIN

Imageepoch's *Criminal Girls* is like an anime-RPG version of the women-in-prison sexploitation sub-genre of films. You control a young man who's been sent to a sort of limbo, where you're put in charge of rehabilitating the criminal girls of the title, by taking them through a tower containing various trials. They've died, but the universe has decided they might have a chance to avoid hell, with your help. Each girl is associated with some specific sin; although it's initially unclear what they've done (or would've done, if they'd continued life on Earth), their backstories are eventually revealed.

Functionally, it's a pretty standard dungeon-crawling RPG, in which you wander around hallways (which look to be randomly-generated but are actually just really basic) to train up your lady squad. Combat is a little unusual in that each of the four active girls will suggest a single attack, then you choose the best one and target the enemy. The attacks proposed are mostly random, though sometimes the girls will suggest ones relevant to the situation at hand. The types of attack, and how useful they are, will depend on how well you've disciplined your team, which is the key aspect of this series. As you kill enemies, the girls gain CM points, which are then spent for these Motivation sessions. (These were originally called "punishments" in Japanese.) These are mini-games, where you do things like spank them, tickle them with feathers, drip liquid on them, or scrub bubbles off them. The idea is that you're cleaning of them of their "temptations". While the series began on the PSP, a remake of the first one (and its sequel) were made for the Vita, and they utilise the system's touch screen here, allowing you to rub the anime girls to level them up, all while they bounce around in suggestive poses. There's something extremely skeezy about all of this, especially for the girls who are very obviously under-aged, and it veers dangerously close to non-consensual, to the point where the localised versions had to be toned back a bit, including adding extra pink mist in the first game to obscure some of the images. (Various releases have also been banned completely in certain countries.) In the context of the game, it's supposed to be sadomasochistic gratification on the girl's part rather than actual torture, as most of the punishments are quite goofy.

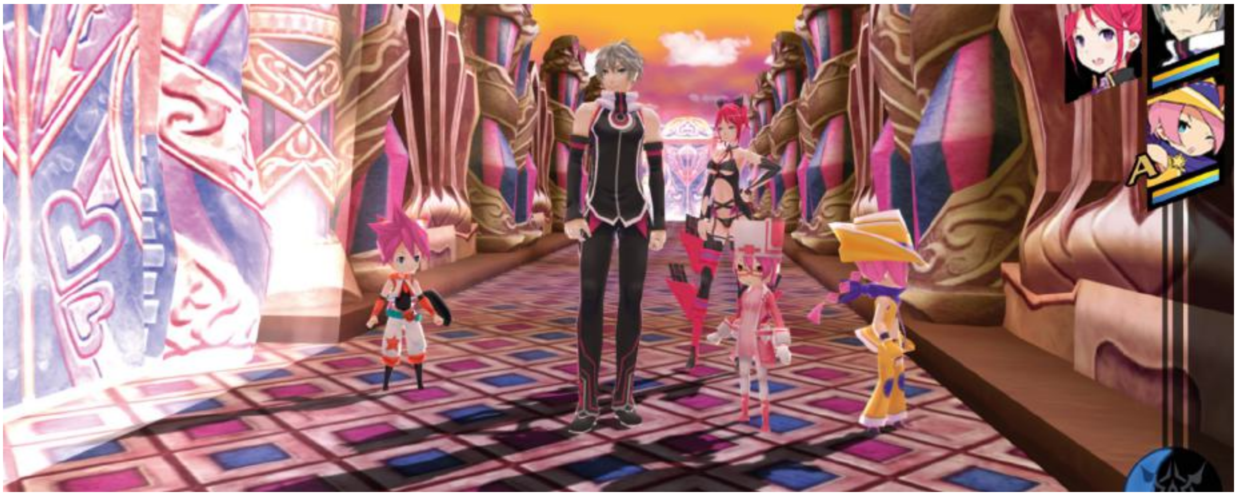


There are two games in the series, which are mostly similar, though featuring a different roster of girls. The first game, subtitled *Invite Only* for the Vita release, has artwork by Ichihaya (known for a variety of erotic artwork), while the second game, subtitled *Party Favors*, has art by Airi Hori. The second also divides skills into S and M classes; you can now shout out words of guidance during combat – scolding, praising, etc. and how the girl interprets these depends on these values.

Criminal Girls revels in its naughtiness, but in spite of the somewhat unique battle system, there's really nothing more to the game than that, and anyone that's not in tune with its particular fetish will almost definitely find it off-putting.

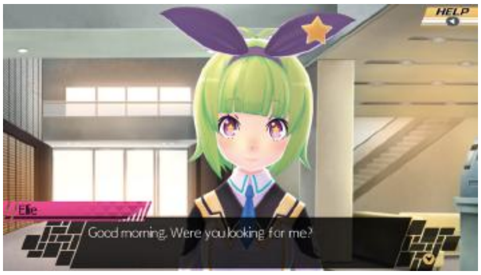
PS VITA
Criminal Girls

Games like *Criminal Girls* are why the PlayStation Vita acquired a reputation as a "creepy anime girl touching" system.



Conception (series)

Developer: Spike-Chunsoft | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): PSP, PSV, 3DS, PS4, WIN



Elie

Good morning. Were you looking for me?

PS4
Conception II
Children of the Seven Stars

Outside of combat, you can meet with any of the ladies in your school in order to enhance your relationship before Classmating with them. Pictured above left is Ellie Troit from *Conception II.*

In Spike-Chunsoft's *Conception*, you control a young man who is bestowed the illustrious title of "God's Gift". Along with this comes a harem of young women, who provide aid in destroying the demons that threaten to destroy the world.

The game takes its inspiration from the *Persona* games. Each of the women has different attributes, and you can chat with them or take them on dates to increase their affection towards you. Then, you can perform a ritual called Classmating, which will create little Star Children that hatch out of Matryoshka (Russian nested dolls), based on your chosen partner and their affection towards you. They then accompany the hero as he explores randomly-generated dungeons and kills monsters. During combat, you focus on a single enemy at a time, and can choose from four positions surrounding it. It's to your advantage to stay away from its attack zones, so you can avoid damage, but if you face your foe head on, you can increase the Chain Drive bar more quickly, disabling them temporarily, and perform Chain attacks. If you can bring multiple Star Children, a bunch of them can assemble together to fight as a single unit. There are different endings, depending on which girl likes the hero best.

As dating sims, the *Conception* games are very kitchsy and over-the-top, as the girls have flashy appearances and stereotypical personalities. For the most part, the game doesn't take itself seriously. However, neither the dating nor the RPG elements have much depth, and it ends up falling flat. Plus, some of the characters appear to be on the young side, and even though you're not technically mating with them, it still has a majorly creepy vibe to it. The Star Children also don't have any personalities, being just blank slates that end up getting replaced eventually anyway. The obvious appeal is its "nudge nudge, wink wink" humour, though it becomes exhausting relatively quickly and there's not much going on beneath its surface other than fan service. That was enough to greenlight a short anime TV series, apparently, but it's not really enough to carry a long-form RPG.

The first *Conception* game, subtitled *Ore no Kodomo o Undekure!* ("Please Give Birth to My Child!") was originally released for the PSP and was not translated into English until the 2019 HD ports for PlayStation 4 and Windows, now called *Conception Plus: Maidens of the Twelve Stars*. This game has 12 heroines, based on the symbols of the Zodiac, with one of the more amusing ones being Gemini, who has a split personality. Mahiru, the protagonist's childhood friend, was so hated by Japanese fans that her character was rewritten to be less abrasive for the update. The second game, subtitled *Children of the Seven Stars*, was released for the Vita and 3DS in 2013, and later ported to computers, with an international release. This pares back the heroine count to seven and associates them with various elements. The big improvement in the sequel is that one of your lady friends can accompany you to any dungeon, giving them a more active role in combat, so they feel less like broodmares than in the first game.

Ever Oasis

Developer: Grezzo | Released: 2017 | Platform(s): 3DS

Ever Oasis
NINTENDO 3DS

Take *Secret of Mana*, give it town-building and weapon-crafting components, and you've (sort of) got *Ever Oasis.*

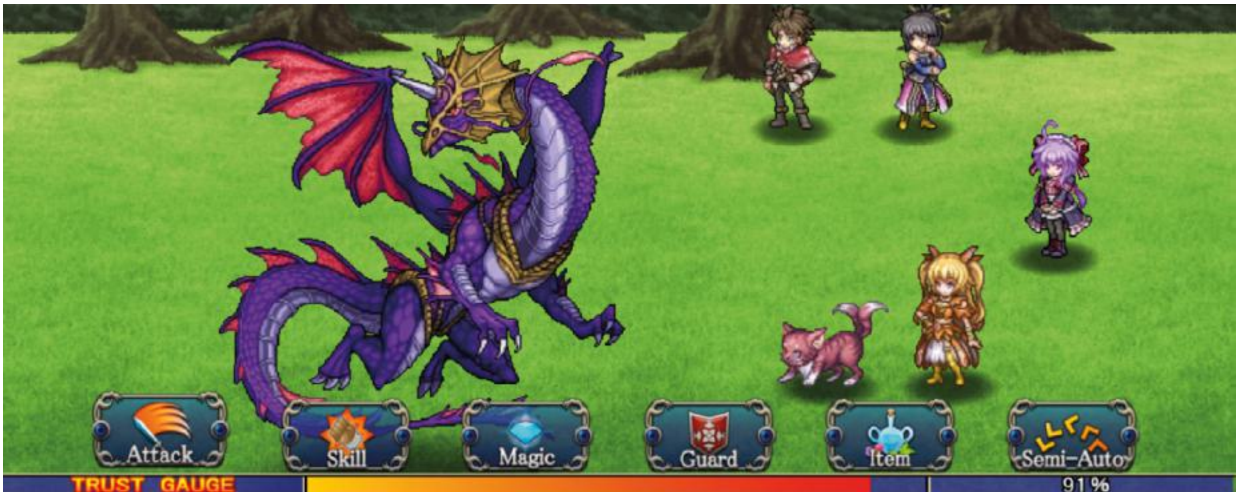
Since the moment it was revealed, *Ever Oasis* has been championed as a spiritual successor to Square Enix's *Secret of Mana*. Although the comparison makes sense, it only does so to a point. The main reason many see this Grezzo-made, Nintendo-published 3DS game as being *Mana*-esque is that series creator Koichi Ishii directed its development. Also, shortly after its tutorial is out of the way, players can control three characters at once – just like they could in the 16-bit precursor to this 2017 release.

It doesn't take long for *Ever Oasis* to show it's more than just some knockoff, however. A prime example: beyond the basics, like exploring a vast world and beating up countless enemies, it tasks players with building a town – or, more accurately, an oasis – to combat a mysterious Chaos that's threatening to consume the desert serving as the game's setting.

From time to time, Seedlings (that's what the humanoid creatures are called here) wander into your burgeoning burg and offer to set up shop. Should you accept, you get to decide on the location of their whimsically designed Bloom Booths. You also get to forage for the materials that allow them to stock their shelves. Sadly, the various wares they make and hawk aren't for you; instead, they're for *Ever Oasis*' adorable, birdlike Noot beings. You do get a cut of their sales, so it's not all bad.

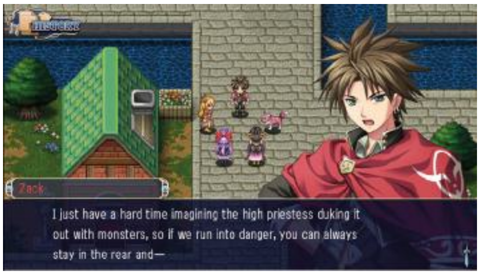
These and similar tasks are intriguing and even kind of thrilling at first, but for most players they'll lose their lustre over the long haul. They're a necessary evil, though, because some Seedlings, who do double duty as party members, won't seek out your oasis unless it has a certain number of inhabitants or a certain type of store. Another aspect of this title that's a bit of a drag revolves around the three-person parties mentioned earlier. Though you can switch between your current trio of fighters on the fly while out in the field, you can only trade them for others while within the cozy confines of your precious oasis. This is a problem, because you regularly need to reconfigure your party to gather ingredients or solve the plethora of dungeon puzzles that are tossed your way. (Both of these activities require specific skills or weapons, and your average Seedling has in just one of each.) The game eventually provides a shortcut that lets you warp home at the press of a button, but that only helps so much, and doesn't keep the overall process from becoming needlessly exhausting.

That's about the extent of *Ever Oasis*' pitfalls, though. Fighting baddies and probing dungeons are the focus of this 3DS effort, and both of those activities are as satisfying as you're probably imagining them to be, given the game's pedigree. Add to this the game's captivating, Egyptian-inspired visuals and impressively varied soundtrack, which veers between breezy and triumphant tunes, and you have a beefy action RPG that deserves to sit alongside the aforementioned *Mana* titles – even if it might be better off as a more streamlined affair.



Kemco JRPGs (series)

Developer: assorted companies | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): IOS, AND, WIN, 3DS, PSV, PS4


Zack

I just have a hard time imagining the high priestess duking it out with monsters, so if we run into danger, you can always stay in the rear and—

ASDIVINE HEARTS

Kemco as a publisher is mostly known for its NES localisations of MacVenture titles like *Shadowgate* and *Déjà Vu*. They did gain a bit of experience in RPGs with their Game Boy series *Sword of Hope*, the NES game *Ghost Lion*, and the SNES port of the French PC game *Drakkhen*. They didn't really put out anything of note through the late '90s and early 2000s, but starting around 2007, they found their niche by publishing classic-style JRPGs for mobile platforms. Initially confined to Japanese NTT DoCoMo phones, the advent of iOS and Android platforms allowed these titles to proliferate including English releases. Actually, "proliferate" is putting it mildly – between 2010 and 2020, Kemco published over 100 RPGs, mostly on smartphones but with some ported to consoles and Windows, primarily developed by companies like Exe Create and World Wide Software.

When you're averaging nearly a dozen similar games a year, obviously the bar of quality is not going to be very high. Indeed, in the early days, most of the titles seemed like they could be any amateur effort put together with something like *RPG Maker*, which in turn resemble the 16-bit *Final Fantasy* titles. As they moved to more powerful platforms, some made to the jump to 3D, which effectively put them roughly on the same level as a PlayStation Portable or Vita game. The games are also aimed more towards a casual audience, the type that remembered playing these games in their childhood but haven't kept up in the same way hardcore fans have.

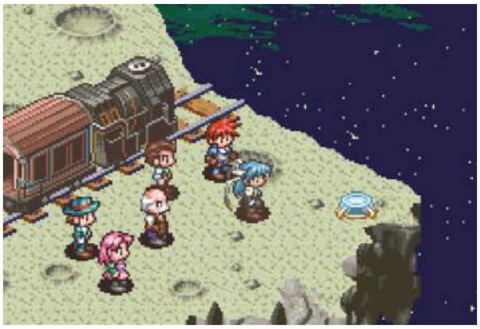
Their first title was called *Alphadia*, which saw five primary entries, a smartphone remake, and the *Alphadia Genesis* sequel series. Their library runs through an assortment of ridiculous names, as if a "JRPG Title-Maker" program had been used to slam words together, including some fictional ones, ending up with names like *Soul Historica*, *Asdivine Hearts*, *Tears Revolude*, *Fanatic Earth*, *Astral Frontier*, *Djinn Caster*, *Dragon Lapis*, *Dimension Cross*, and *Ambition Record*. Most of these games are fairly generic, though some borrow elements from more popular titles. *Dragon Sinker* and *Dark Gate* have interesting class systems, similar to those in the *Final Fantasy* games, while *Alvastia Chronicles* offers 100 recruitable characters and allows 13 at a time in battle. *Rusted Emeth* is also inspired by *Metal Max*, a rather obscure RPG outside of Japan.

None of the games themselves are particularly unique, but their existence does spotlight a JRPG corner that was neglected for quite a long time. Most Japanese companies focused on console and portable games and tended to be blind to the affection lingering for the 16/32-bit eras, outside of porting their back catalogue to mobile platforms. But Kemco offered many similar titles, close enough to, though never achieving, that quality, and they all hit the same nostalgia buttons. Plus, they were all so cheap, hovering around the 5–8 USD level, even at full price, that even if the experience wasn't particularly great, you still got your nostalgia bone tickled and would probably feel like you'd gotten your money's worth.

Companies like Square Enix embraced the enthusiasm for retro-styled games, with titles like *Octopath Traveler*, but these were also full-priced games, whereas Kemco RPGs were designed to be quick and throwaway efforts. Not exactly art, but it is capitalism!

CIMA: The Enemy

Developer: Neverland | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): GBA



CIMA **is an unusual blend of puzzle, strategy, and action from the folks behind the** ***Lufia*** **games.**

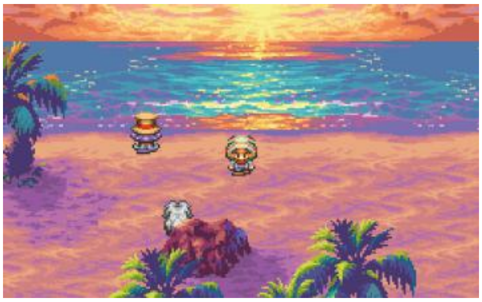
Best known for the *Lufia* series, Neverland attempted to innovate within the RPG genre by combining a little bit of puzzle, strategy and action into *CIMA: The Enemy*, known as *Frontier Stories* in Japan. The game tells the story of an alien race called CIMA who, as the title suggests, are the Enemy, as they feed on human hope. The CIMA stick humans in dungeons and feed on the emotional toll the experience takes, which eventually kills them. The player assumes the role of a Gate Guardian, whose job it is to escort the prisoners out of the dungeons. The game melds together the mechanics of a puzzle/strategy game, as you provide direction to the prisoners so they can exit the dungeon, and an action RPG, as your lead heroes, Ark J and Ivy F, hack and slash through the CIMA who are attempting to reach the prisoners.

The points *CIMA: The Enemy* gains for its innovative take on the genre, it loses for that attempt mostly falling flat on its face. The people you are escorting, and the Enemies, suffer from poor AI, and many challenges can be defeated by finding the CIMA's spawn points and camping at them. Boss battles remove all the characters but Ark J, and the play becomes a straight-up action RPG-style boss fight, focused on figuring out the boss pattern and avoiding attacks.

Visually, the game looks good enough, for a Game Boy Advance JRPG, but nothing really stands out. There is a very cool concept contained within *CIMA: The Enemy* that is unfortunately not sufficiently fleshed out to make it more than a lower than average, however innovative, entry in the JRPG catalogue. Still, there wasn't much like it on the Game Boy Advance at the time.

Magical Vacation / Magical Starsign

Developer: Brownie Brown | Released: 2001 | Platform(s): GBA, DS



As an anime take on the magic school trope, this portable series isn't bad, though hardly a classic.

Nintendo subsidiary Brownie Brown is known for contract work, but their first creation, and only original series, often gets overlooked. *Magical Vacation* follows a group of students at Will-O-Wisp magic school, who are attacked by monsters on a field trip. You and your friends search for your missing classmates and eventually save the world. The story isn't anything new, but it is pleasantly lighthearted. The game has a *Pokémon*-like 16-element system, whereby every character has an element providing them with one weakness and one resistance. In addition, both you and the enemy can summon spirits that power up elements, adding an element of risk/reward.

Visually, it's obvious that *Vacation* is an early GBA title, but it makes up for it with strong design reminiscent of a kids' anime. The soundtrack by Tsukasa Masuko (*Megami Tensei)* is decent, but it relies on Game Boy PSG. Unfortunately, the game was not released in English.

Five years later, Brownie Brown released a sequel for the DS, *Magical Starsign*, which was released in English by Nintendo. *Starsign* takes place centuries after *Vacation,* with a new cast. This time, your friends travel the solar system to rescue your teacher, visiting planets themed after elements. Speaking of elements, there are now only seven. Spirits are also gone. Instead, elements gain power when their planet is in the right astrological phase, which you can eventually manipulate.

Starsign takes the first game's art style and updates it. The DS allows for set pieces, in which the top screen is used to extend the field of view, and the space flavour and themed planets add more variety. Overall, neither games are outstanding, but they're pleasant and enjoyable.

Contact

Developer: Grasshopper Manufacture | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): DS

Contact is a game unlike Grasshopper Manufacture's usual fare. It was a DS release, directed by former Square developer Akira Ueda, who also directed the *Shining Soul* games on the GBA. It's a quirky JRPG about a boy named Terry existing in a 32-bit world (à la *Golden Sun*) and a 16-bit professor in another dimension, who work together to collect crystals and stop an evil plot that threatens multiple worlds.

The game has themes of communication and the uncertainty of childhood, plus a meta story, with the professor talking to you, the player, directly, instructing you to guide Terry. There are quite a few twists and turns, and some quite dark moments, including one world where you have to fight human soldiers. The slightly childish tone is still there, though, all the way up to the twist ending.

Contact has interesting concepts hampered by iffy execution. Terry fights on auto-pilot, with you selecting items and skills, moving Terry, and so forth. This works, but the difficulty spikes demand grinding, which gets tedious alongside all the other grinding. Terry's skill with a weapon only grows by using said weapon, and this goes for his costume powers too. To make matters worse, you need to be skilled in every weapon type, because enemies have weapon-specific weaknesses.

NINTENDO DS
Contact
ATLUS

Contact is a grindy game that wears out its welcome quickly, as the plot is sparsely dished out between dungeon crawls. Even its wi-fi feature, an island that passing players can trade items on, feels half baked. However, it's unlike anything else from that or any era, an experience that sticks in the mind like few things do.

***Contact* was initially advertised as a successor to *EarthBound,* due to story similarities, though it doesn't remotely reach those lofty heights.**

A Witch's Tale

Developer: Hit Maker | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): DS

Developed by the now-defunct Hit Maker – which had previously made a pair of unheralded PSP RPGs – and published by Nippon Ichi Software, this 2009 Nintendo DS release stars a bratty witch-in-training named Liddell. Liddell opens *A Witch's Tale* by inadvertently unleashing an ancient, evil sorceress upon the world while attempting to track down a forbidden spell she read about in her school's library. A handsome, if stern, vampire named Loue, whose creepy castle houses said magic, then forces her to right her wrong.

Besides its pigtailed protagonist and magical setting, the main aspect that sets *A Witch's Tale* apart from the RPG pack is that it's completely touch-based. This is most apparent in the game's *Dragon Quest*-esque battles. To unleash an especially impressive, and destructive, spell, you and your party of animated dolls (yes, dolls) need to trace a Rune on the DS' lower screen. It's fun at first, but does its best to slow the adventure to a crawl over the longer term.

A Witch's Tale puts up other barriers to players' enjoyment, too. The lack of explorable space – a hub town connects you to seven themed areas that basically serve as dungeons, and that's it – is one example. Another is its short length. Thankfully, several other components work hard to compensate for that handful of shortcomings. More often than not, the text in *A Witch's Tale* is witty. And its eclectic soundtrack, supplied by Sara Sakurai, regularly pleases as well.

HP 660 MP 253

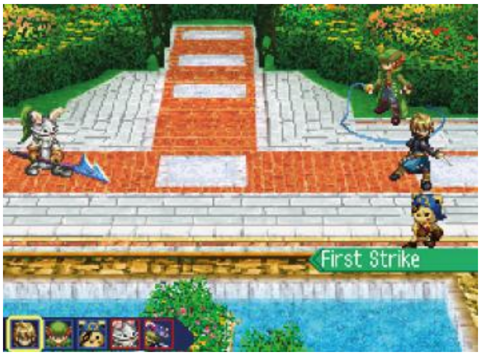
NINTENDO DS
A Witch's Tale

In the end, although *A Witch's Tale* is far from a classic RPG, it deserves kudos and attention for daring to tread its own path.

If you like your DS RPGs short, spooky, and stylus-focused, you should love *A Witch's Tale.*

Sands of Destruction

Developer: Imageepoch | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS



Nintendo DS
Sands of Destruction
SEGA

In the world of *Sands of Destruction*, humans are slaves to beasts. Unhappy with the order of things, a girl named Morte forms an organisation called World Annihilation Front, with the ultimate goal of just destroying everything. She meets up with the protagonist Kyrie, who possesses the power to turn almost anything to sand, and they begin a tour of the world before ending it.

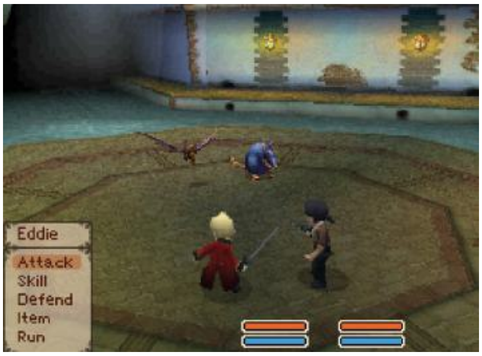
This game is a sort of reunion of various team members from *Xenogears*, including writer Masato Kato, artist Kunihiko Tanaka, and composer Yasunori Mitsuda. The game itself was developed by Imageepoch and published by SEGA. However, it doesn't live up to its pedigree. The premise itself is ridiculous, in that the concept of the apocalypse is presented with such levity, and Morte has such a weirdly upbeat attitude towards it that she seems like a sociopath. It is unusual enough to be intriguing though, and has Taupy, who looks like a stuffed bear and a shockingly deep voice, as its standout character.

The battle system does recall *Xenogears*, with button presses forming combos. It's a little more complex, in that you can hit enemies between the two DS screens, and extend your combos by chaining enough attacks together. However, the battles drag on, and the game just doesn't feel satisfying. Coupled with the constant random encounters, unskippable voiced dialogue, and confusing dungeons, it ends up feeling tedious. An anime was released around the same time, using the same characters, though the story is markedly different.

***Sands of Destruction*'s team was a reunion of some of the *Xenogears* staff, but don't go expecting this one to have anywhere near the same level of quality.**

Nostalgia

Developer: Red/Matrix | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): DS



Nintendo DS
Nostalgia

As the title not-so-subtly implies, *Nostalgia* is meant to be a throwback to simpler times. It includes stock characters, random battles, and unironically begins with a sewer maze. The game focuses on young Edward Brown, who aspires to be like his adventurer father, who has disappeared.

The game was produced by Red Entertainment, known for '90s classics like *Tengai Makyou* and *Sakura Wars*. The atmosphere makes it superficially similar to SEGA's excellent *Skies of Arcadia*, especially given its young, mysterious power-wielding heroine, Fiona. The story is a steampunk-flavoured alternate reality. The style is something like late 19th century Victorian Europe, although people here travel in airships that look a bit like blimps. While the game begins in western Europe, you'll travel to the pyramids in Egypt, St. Petersburg in Russia, Mt. Fuji in Japan, and New York City in the US. Side quests even involve Atlantis and the lost continent of Mu. The real-world locations might sound cool, but this excitement is quickly quelled when you see that London has been reduced to a simple, two-screen JRPG town.

While the standard battles are fairly traditional, the airship battles change things up a little bit. Instead of characters attacking individually, each one mans a weapon on the airship, each with different properties. Some airships have giant blades, and it's amusing to dash through the air and swipe at the opponent.

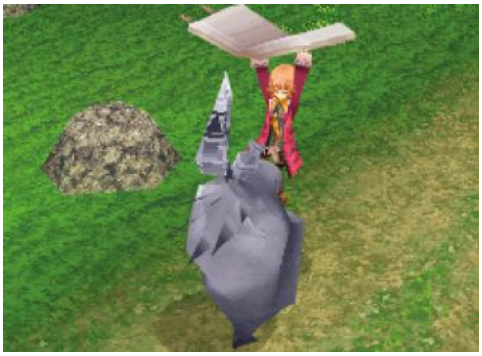
There's nothing that *Nostalgia* does that's explicitly bad, it's just bland and never fulfils its full potential.

***Nostalgia* recalls the 16-bit era of JRPGs, though frankly you'd be better off actually playing one of the classics instead of this tepid imitator.**

Avalon Code

Developer: Matrix | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS

The world is ending! Your job in *Avalon Code* isn't technically to stop it, but rather, to record what's interesting about it in a gigantic tome called the Book of Prophecy. By whacking things with it, you'll scan their beings, which reveals properties called Codes that you can switch around between characters or items. For example, you can heal sick people by removing their illnesses, weaken enemies by giving them poison, or use various metals to improve weapons.



NINTENDO DS
AVALON CODE

Alas, this ambitious concept is subject to various limitations, as the number of things you can scan is limited, and Codes don't always work logically. The Book is displayed on the bottom screen and catalogues everything in the world, all available via touch commands. Again, a cool concept, but the index is limited, and when you need to find certain characters, you need to flip each page one by one. When moving Codes, which you'll do a lot, you can only hold four at a time, so an inordinate amount of time is spent juggling them. Other aspects disappoint – the combat is simple, and the "dungeons" are just a series of boring timed exercises. Filling out the book requires exploring every inch of every room and defeating enemies repeatedly, which is also quite tedious.

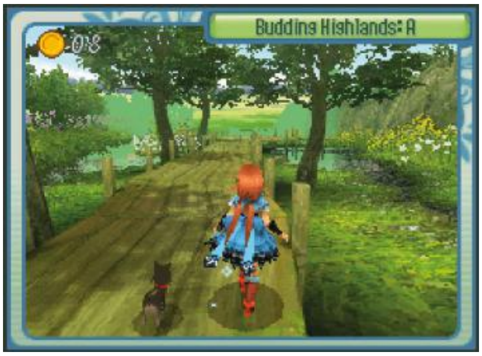
It's a decent-looking game, with characters by fantasy artist HACCAN, and the pleasant music by Minako Adachi (*Riviera*, *Pokémon*) is quality as well. The characters are likeable – you can romance a few of them – and the story obviously gets dark in spite of its light-hearted beginnings, so it's a shame that the game doesn't properly come together.

Rewriting the DNA of everything around you sounds like a great time, but its implementation in *Avalon Code* is just far too limited.

The Wizard of Oz: Beyond the Yellow Brick Road

Developer: Media.Vision | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): DS

There have been plenty of video games based on *The Wizard of Oz*, and Media.Vision's take, known as *RIZ-ZOAWD* (an anagram of "Wizard Oz") in Japan, reimagines the story as a JRPG. Dorothy and Toto are whisked away to Oz to journey along the Yellow Brick Road, where she quickly meets her companions. But making their way to the Emerald City is only the first part of their journey, as they're quickly tasked with defeating the various witches of the kingdom, based on the four seasons, who command squadrons of adorable little cat soldiers.



NINTENDO DS
The WIZARD of OZ
Beyond the Yellow Brick Road

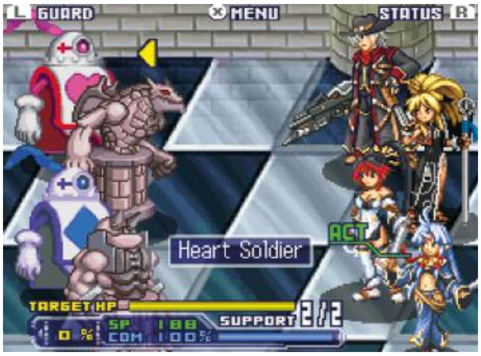
The area layouts are generally straight lines with occasional branches, while Dorothy is controlled entirely by "rolling" a trackball-like orb on the bottom touch screen. Combat plays out a bit like in *Dragon Quest*, though each character has a different Ratio, which determines how often they can act in turn. Quicker characters like Dorothy and the Scarecrow can act up to four times, while slower ones like the Lion and the Tin Man have larger Ratios, so they can't act as often, but they're also more powerful. Each character also has certain strengths against particular enemy types.

The game is obviously meant for kids and JRPG newbies, as both the systems and the story are pretty simple. While genre fans will likely find it boring, it's well balanced and serves the casual audience well. It is exceedingly pretty, indeed one of the best-looking 3D titles on the DS, and the music – with a main theme by *Wild Arms* composer Michiko Naruke and a soundtrack by *Final Fantasy Tactics* virtuoso Hitoshi Sakimoto – is also quite pleasant.

This is a fairly pleasant, albeit simple, take on the L. Frank Baum stories. Check out the adventure game *Yellow Brick Road* for another interesting take on the tale.

Super Robot Taisen OG Saga: Endless Frontier

Developer: Monolith Soft | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS



NINTENDO DS
Super Robot Taisen OG Saga
Endless Frontier

What do you get when you mix a cowboy, two androids, a princess, a robot puppeteer, and a whole lot of mechas? You get this, a spinoff from the *Super Robot Taisen: Original Generation* series. *Endless Frontier* is a hodgepodge of Monolith Soft characters and mechas from the aforementioned series in a combo, turned-based battle system.

The story follows Haken Browning, a mercenary, and his faithful android companion, Aschen, as they perform missions across a plethora of worlds, the Endless Frontier. While exploring a mysterious ship connected to Haken's past, the two discover a sleeping princess, Kaguya Nanbu. The crew's journey back to her kingdom to claim the bounty on her head spans multiple worlds and co-stars KOS-MOS from *Xenosaga,* along with Reiji and Xiaomu from the PlayStation 2 strategy RPG, *Namco × Capcom.*

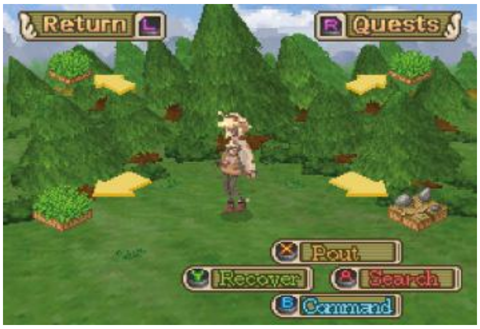
Leaving behind its strategy RPG roots, *Super Robot Taisen OG Saga: Endless Frontier* features a battle system that focuses on juggling enemies in the style of a fighting game. Each turn, characters are given a certain amount of COM, used to perform different attacks that hurl enemies into the air. Keeping enemies in the air is key to battle success; dropping an enemy on the ground gives them the chance to strike back. But with the power of your party members, and mechas tagging in to help, playing *Endless Frontier* becomes a game of linking the right combos together.

The fights are fun, albeit drawn out, while the story is mostly silly nonsense. A sequel named *Endless Frontier Exceed* was released in 2010, but remained Japan-only.

***Super Robot Taisen OG Saga: Endless Frontier* offers a diverse cast of characters with a touch of fighting game mechanics, providing a solid RPG experience.**

My World, My Way

Developer: Global A Entertainment | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS, PSP



NINTENDO DS
My World My Way

Princess Elise has grown up spoiled. The only thing she wants is a handsome suitor, and she thinks she's found the perfect mate ... except he's an adventurer who has little interest in someone so privileged. Determined to win his heart, Elise becomes a fighter, and leaves the comfortable confines of her castle to become stronger.

Most of the game consists of running various quests. What's unusual is that this game doesn't really have a traditional overworld, but rather several small areas mapped out on a grid. Princess Elise may not be a rough-and-ready warrior, but she is a princess, so she can spend Pout Points for a variety of different effects. In battle, they can be used to dismiss enemies or inflict status effects; outside of battle, they can change the terrain (which affects enemies), weaken or strengthen monsters, grant more experience points, and make other changes. There are some traditional dungeons, which tie in with *Master of the Monster Lair*, a previous game by this developer. Battles are straightforward, though other than Elise, the only other, fighter is her pet slime, which can morph into enemies to mimic their abilities.

The concept is great, not only for the cutesy premise and charming heroine, but also for flipping the typical gender roles. But the gameplay loop is repetitive and it wears thin pretty quickly. There's not much actual story, and the only major character other than Elise is the castle swordsman assigned by the king to secretly protect her. Only the DS version was released in English; the later PSP port, which includes full voice acting and some extra features, including the ability to send Elise down light or dark paths, is Japanese-only.

Playing as a bratty princess whose world obeys her whims possesses an amusing novelty.

Sigma Harmonics

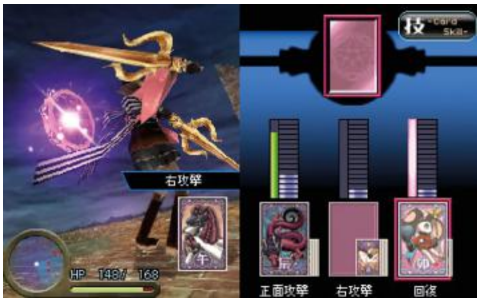
Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS

Sigma Harmonics is a time-travelling murder-mystery JRPG with rhythm elements. Ambitious as it is, it offers little more than what's it's borrowed. Waking up one day, the titular Sigma discovers that his past has been rewritten, changing his present. With the help of his friend, Neon Tsukiyumi, Sigma uses his sound user ability and the family clock to travel through time and solve murders.

Sigma does most of the murder mystery legwork, while Neon handles combat. The songs Sigma plays change the charge times of Neon's ability cards, and can reduce the wait for her attacks or healing actions. Neon can change between three forms: a card wielder with twin blades, a gothic Lolita with a sword skirt, and a gunner in army camo who flips and shoots through battles. The best part of the murder mysteries is that no matter how badly you fumble them, Sigma delivers his breakdown of the case with such vigor that any idiotic possibility is still played straight.

While combat is unique and fun, the murder mystery aspect of it is not handled with the same care. Rather than opting for a *Phoenix Wright*-style strike or a *Layton* scolding, guessing or coming up with absurd logic isn't punished … at first. That comes in the form of the chapter's final boss, sealing abilities, among other annoying things. Brute force is an option for combat enthusiasts, but solving the mysteries correctly makes the boss fights about as easy as a regular random encounter.

A beautiful soundtrack composed by Masashi Hamauzu and character designs by Yusaku Nakaaki accompany this unique, yet flawed, fusion of gameplay styles. Alas, Square Enix passed on its localisation.



NINTENDO DS

This unusual time-travelling title was perhaps a little too unusual for the international audience.

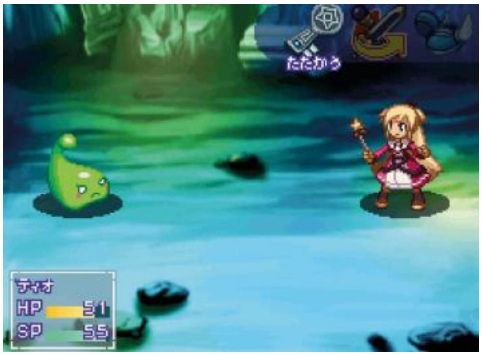
Kimi no Yuusha

Developer: SNK | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS

Role-playing games are often known for their lengthy quests, but they're the sort of game that players often grow out of, just because they don't have time to play them anymore. SNK sought to resolve that problem with *Kimi no Yuusha* ("Your Hero"), which presents quests that can each be completed in about 30 minutes, fitting into an average work commute. There is a central story, of course, and 25 episodes in total.

The game was produced by Yoshiyasu Matsushita, known for *Twinkle Star Sprites*, with artwork by Mimoli Fujinomiya, who also worked on the PS2 sequel to *Twinkle Star Sprites*, *La Petite Princesse*, as well as *Doki Doki Majo Shinpan*, the infamous witch-touching game for the DS that was revealed around the same time as *Kimi no Yuusha*. As such, most of the character roster consists of lots of cutesy girls. It is, thankfully, free of *Doki Doki Majo Shinpan*'s overt creepiness, and the sprite artwork used in battles is pretty decent. There are 11 characters in total, of various races and classes (the coolest are Silk, the martial artist mermaid and Haim, a vampire aristocrat), with a magician girl named Tio ostensibly being the main character.

RPGs weren't exactly SNK's speciality – there was *Crystalis* on the NES and the *Samurai Shodown* RPG, but that was about the extent of it – so it's not something they have a lot of experience at. The dungeons are fairly rote (although short), the random encounter rate is a little high, and the battle system is basic. However, despite its issues, it is fairly fun and cutesy.



NINTENDO DS
キミの勇者

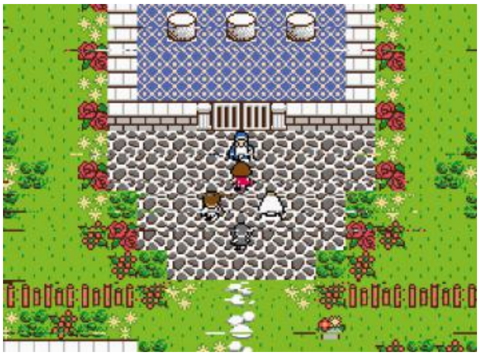
The cute characters and well-designed pixel artwork are the key elements in this short, straightforward RPG meant for adults who miss the game-playing days of their youth.

Nanashi no Game

Developer: Epics | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS

Hideo Nakata 1998's horror film *Ring* made quite an impact on the world of horror, with one simple concept – what if a video tape was haunted? *Nanashi no Game* ("The Nameless Game") has basically the same premise – there's a cursed video game, and anyone who plays it dies within seven days. Most of this experience plays out like a first-person horror adventure game, as you hold the DS system sideways like a book, explore spooky environments, and avoid ghosts.

At certain points, you're required to enter the cursed game in question, which is a dead ringer for an 8-bit *Final Fantasy*. But everything about it is visibly off, with graphical glitches that would normally suggest a dusty cartridge but here come across as something far more sinister. It's not even possible to make out the title of the game (it is nameless, after all). During your trips into this retro throwback, you spend much of your time inside of a small town. NPCs in this type of game rarely did much of anything other than spout simple lines of dialogue, but things get crazy and weird, as they are routinely sacrificed, complete with pixelated blood spurts.



ナナシ ノ ゲエム
DSで恐怖体験。

Of course, *Nanashi no Game* isn't really an RPG, since there's no gold, no battling, and no exploration. Rather, it's a horror adventure that uses the familiar trappings of an RPG to creep the player out. A sequel, *Nanashi no Game Me*, takes the game-within-a-game further, by making the cursed game's avatars represent the three in-game "real world" characters, and expands the areas with various challenges. Unfortunately, both games remained Japan-only.

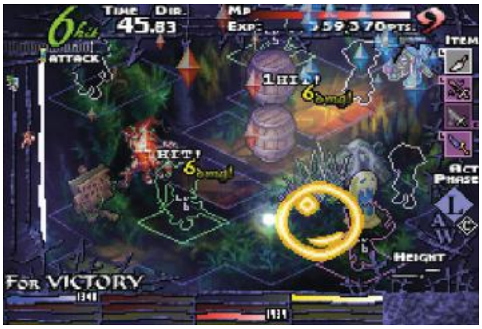
According to producer Takashi Tokita, this game series performed poorly with American focus test groups, so Square decided against an international release.

Knights in the Nightmare

Developer: Sting | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS, PSP

Sting had a reputation for making unusual RPG hybrids, but *Knights in the Nightmare*, part of their *Dept. Heaven* series, is so bizarre it defies classification – the closest you could get is calling it a bullet-hell action strategy RPG.

Each level is a single area, divided into a grid, which contains the player's units, some enemies, and some items. The player controls a cursor called a wisp, guided with a stylus (in the DS version) or the analogue nub (in the PSP port). Each turn lasts for a certain number of seconds, with the goal being to destroy all of the enemies, and obtain items. By hovering over one of your units, you'll command and charge up their attacks – they can't move, but you can change their direction. At the same time, enemies toss out bullets in elaborate patterns that will harm the wisp, depleting your time for the turn. There are two Phases, Law and Chaos, which determine the range of the units' attacks, among other things; there are also items that can be used for super-special attacks. There are tons of these, mostly for specific classes. New units can be added to your team, but only if you satisfy certain conditions and get certain items.



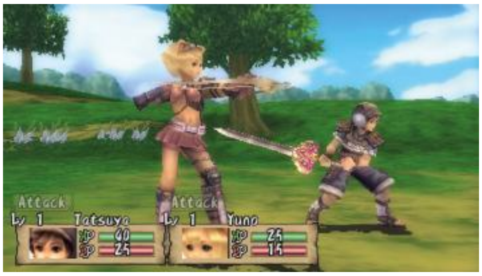
Knights in the Nightmare

This only scratches the surface, because the game is massively over-complicated. Sting games tended to have overwhelming, cluttered interfaces, and this is the worst of them. There's a tutorial, but it's only so helpful. The game's steep learning curve makes it hard to really get into, and even the story, involving events that happened at a castle, isn't all that compelling. But the beautiful 2D visuals, along with the fact that there hasn't been anything remotely like it before or since, turns it into a fascinating, if puzzling, artefact.

***Knights in the Nightmare* is Sting at their most utterly incomprehensible.**

Brave Story: New Traveler

Developer: Game Republic | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PSP



PSP
BRAVE STORY
XSEED

For a few years in the mid-2000s, *Brave Story* was quite the multimedia phenomenon. Beginning as a novel written by Miyuki Miyabe, it was adapted into a manga, an anime movie, and three different video games. The PSP release was by Game Republic, the studio formed by ex-Capcom veteran Yoshiki Okamoto, and was the only one to come out in English, courtesy of XSeed. The story in this game is not directly taken from the original novel, but is still based on the same premise of a normal child escaping their real-world troubles by entering a fantasy realm called Vision. Here, a boy named Tatsuya is teleported there when his childhood friend Miki faces a strange illness. He immediately meets up with a catgirl named Yuno, and begins a journey to find five gems for his sword, so he can return home and cure his friend.

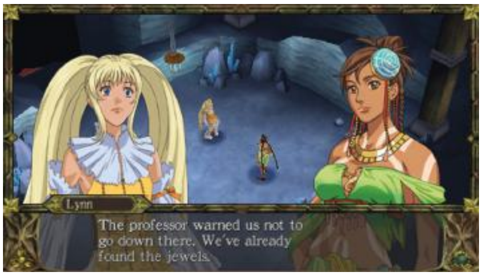
Brave Story: New Traveler is a typical JRPG, both narratively and mechanically, to the point where it feels generic. In battle, characters can use Brave Points to enable various special abilities, including unity attacks between characters, though these points can be replenished in battle by repeatedly attacking enemies, so you can use these skills regularly. Battles are random, but they're resolved quickly. It's also a pretty-looking game, with character models and animation to rival PS2 visuals, and the comic book-style sound words, like "kerpow!", in combat are kinda cool. There are also sub-quests that involve capturing (and battling) cute little birds called Goalfinches.

The game was well received at the time, since it was one of the first decent-quality original RPGs on the system, plus it avoided the technical issues, like long load times, that tended to plague the platform. But in itself, it's merely adequate.

While popular in Japan, the only elements of *Brave Story* released in English were this game, the manga series, and the original novel.

Monster Kingdom: Jewel Summoner

Developer: Gaia | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): PSP


Lynn

The professor warned us not to go down there. We've already found the jewels.

PSP
Jewel Summoner
ATLUS

Designer Kouji "Cozy" Okada was one of the key creators of the *Megami Tensei* series, and worked on nearly all of its titles up to the beginning of the PlayStation 2 era. He left Atlus in 2003 to form the studio Gaia, which first produced *Monster Kingdom: Jewel Summoner* for the PSP.

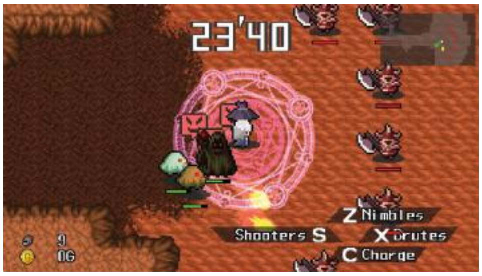
As with the *Megami Tensei* series, the main attraction of *Jewel Summoner* is the ability to capture, create, and battle with a variety of monsters, which are contained within jewels. In combat, only one monster per summoner can be active at once; their abilities drain Jewel Points, and must be switched with a different monster when these run out. Clearly Okada was working with something he was familiar with here, but the strengths of the *Megami Tensei* went far beyond just the demon-collecting part, and *Jewel Summoner* has almost none of them. The story is trite JRPG nonsense, starring a warrior named Vice, who has a mysterious summoning power and joins up with a formal group of summoners. The battle system is rather dull, and the monster designs run from interesting to terrible. The best part of this game is its soundtrack, provided by what reads like a "best of" list of video game music composers, including Kenji Ito (*SaGa*), Yasunori Mitsuda (*Chrono Trigger*), Tsukasa Masuko (*Shin Megami Tensei*), Hitosho Sakimoto and Masaharu Iwata (*Final Fantasy Tactics*), Shinji Hosoe (*Dragon Spirit*), and many others. There's no real consistency, but it's all very good.

The PlayStation 3 game *Folklore* was initially titled *Monster Kingdom: Unknown Realms*, suggesting that Okada was trying to create a franchise, but the connection between them is basically non-existent. The Japan-only PSP action RPG *Coded Soul*, also by Gaia, is also loosely related.

It seems there was no bad blood between Cozy Okada and his former employer, as Atlus happily published this game overseas.

Half-Minute Hero

Developer: Marvelous | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): PSP, X360, WIN



HALF-MINUTE HERO

The sequel, *Half-Minute Hero: The Second Coming*, skipped localisation for the PSP but made it out in English on computer platforms.

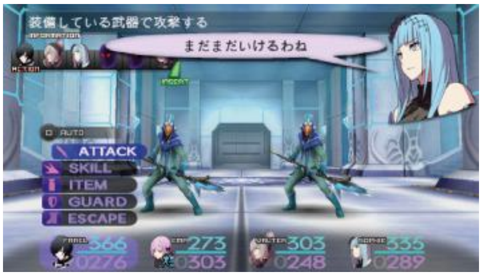
Role-playing games are often thought to be expansive affairs that consume dozens of hours of your life. *Half-Minute Hero* asks you to play an RPG, but in fast forward. The game world is divided into several levels, each beginning the same way – you have 30 seconds until the level boss casts a spell and destroys the world. You then need to fulfil some kind of quest – repair a bridge, kill some bad guys, and so forth – while levelling up, getting money, and buying equipment. Battles are random, but typically resolved in a second or two, depending on your strength, as your hero automatically bumps into foes until they get flung off the screen.

Technically, you have more than 30 seconds to beat each stage, because at any point, you can pray to the Time Goddess statue to reset the timer. This also costs money, but lets you accomplish everything you need to, and defeat the boss before the timer runs out. As such, the game is less of a typical RPG and more an action game that's all about managing time and resources.

The core gameplay is pretty similar throughout, though the light-hearted tone and general silliness make it an easy pick-up-and-play experience. There are also some bonus modes with differing styles of gameplay, in which you play as an evil lord (resembling a real-time strategy game), a princess (a shoot-'em-up) and a knight (an action game). The title was initially released on the PSP, then ported to the Xbox 360 and Windows, with an extra mode that replaces the chunky, retro-styled sprites with ugly children's book-style artwork. The sequel adds some extra features, like party formations and mobile castles. Both games have music provided by a number of legendary composers, including Yuzo Koshiro and Motoi Sakuraba.

Sol Trigger

Developer: Imageepoch | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): PSP



SOL TRIGGER

***Sol Trigger* developer Imageepoch pledged that they would save the Japanese RPG, but they weren't quite able to achieve any breakout hits.**

The hero of *Sol Trigger* is Farel, the new leader of the eponymous rebel group. They oppose the Machine Church, a government organisation that is using humans with the Sol ability for corrupt ends. The game was released in 2012, in the final years of the PSP, and was the highest-budget PSP game developed by the company. Imageepoch, which both developed and published the game, claimed that it was the most ambitious game they had ever made, with significant investment in the game's presentation: character design, voice acting, soundtrack, graphics and animations. These are indeed amazing. The script was also provided by regular *Final Fantasy* scribe Kazushige Nojima.

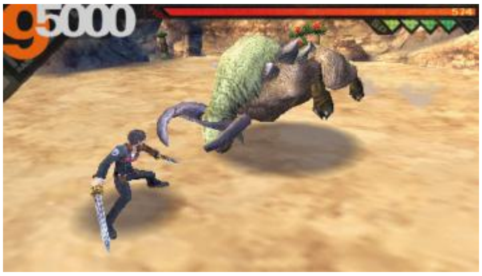
The gameplay shines in its battle system. Each party member has an individual SOL amount that is spent to use skills. Those skills get stronger the more you use them, eventually allowing you to spend more SOL to power them up, enhancing damage, healing, or buffs and debuffs. Depending on which equipment you are using at the time, a new skill may trigger for a character, if the situation calls for it.

The exploration segments are limited to the Sol Trigger base (where you are able to interact with NPCs and party members, and shop) and the story-related dungeons, which are pretty linear, leaving a lot to be desired. The plot itself is divided into two parts. The first one defines how the second is going to roll, based on which female character you romanced.

Sadly, the game did not perform too well in Japan, resulting in cancellation of the planned sequels and adaptations. *Sol Trigger* failed to make any impact, but remained as part of Imageepoch's short legacy.

Last Ranker

Developer: Capcom/Imageepoch | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): PSP



PSP
LAST RANKER
CAPCOM

Zig is a young man who's become bored of his pointless life out in the boonies. In order to find some purpose, he joins a combat organisation called Bazalta. Here, everyone is assigned a numerical rank, which determines their social status. It's very "dog eat dog", as the main way to climb up the ranks is to beat someone higher up. There are 100,000 Rankers, and Zig starts off near the bottom, at 95,000, so he attempts to make a name for himself, uncovering corruption in Bazalta along the way.

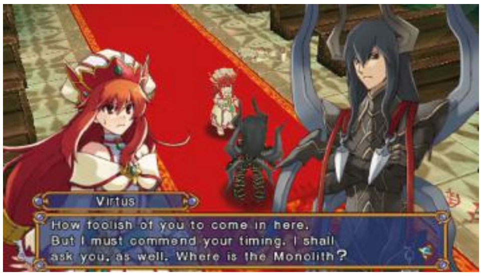
Since the world of *Last Ranker* revolves around fighting, there's obviously a big focus on the combat system. It's a mixture of *Final Fantasy*'s Active Time Battle system and button-based combat as found in games like *Xenogears* and *Legend of Legaia*. The player only commands Zig, who can attack and guard, with the face buttons. The action flows in real time, with his auto-replenishing stamina bar determining what kind of action he can take. A solid strategy will involve killing enemies as quickly as possible while retaining enough strength to block their attacks. Taking down another Ranker will not only elevate Zig's rank, but may also grant him a new skill to use in combat. The game presents itself like a single-player MMORPG, with numerical ranks floating above the heads of other Rankers, and there's a heavy emphasis on completing quests.

There are plenty of big names attached – the story is by Kazushige Nojima (*Final Fantasy VII*), with artwork by Tatsuya Yoshikawa (*Breath of Fire*), and music by Yoko Shimomura (*Kingdom Hearts*). It looks and sounds great, but it also feels underdeveloped, and it's more linear than it seems. It's Japan-only, but still one of the better PSP RPGs.

***Last Ranker* suffers from the same issues as many mid-budget PSP titles: worlds that feel small, unable to meet the ambition of their stories.**

Hexyz Force

Developer: Sting | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): PSP



Virtus

How foolish of you to come in here.
But I must commend your timing. I shall
ask you, as well. Where is the Monolith?

PSP
Hexyz Force

Hexyz Force takes place in a world caught between light and darkness. The gods of life and destruction exist in a constant cycle of reincarnation, and it's up to a team called the Hexyz to climb the Tower of Judgment and determine the fate of the world. You can choose from two characters – Cecillia, a female cleric, and Levant, a male knight. Their stories are largely independent, with different supporting casts of characters, though they join up together for the final areas.

The heroes wield weapons called Ragnafacts, which consume an MP-like stat called Ragnapoints. Alongside with this is a crafting system whereby you can create weapons that aren't quite as powerful and break after a number of uses, but also won't consume Ragnapoints, so they're still fairly useful. There's a rock-paper-scissors elemental system, and weapons can be improved using Force Points obtained after battle. If you overkill enemies, you can obtain more goodies after fights. Characters also have individual special attacks, called Force Bursts, which are shared among the party members and build power over consecutive battles.

There's an alignment system that changes depending on your actions, leading to one of three endings. Along with the dual perspectives, this creates a big incentive to play through the game multiple times. However, while the systems are well put together, most everything about *Hexyz Force* is fairly typical, which is disappointing, considering that Sting games are typically known for their eccentricities. It features the same artist (Sunaho Tobe) as the rest of the *Dept. Heaven* games, but it's not part of the series. The game is nothing special, but it does have a minor character named Bigabu Beaze, so that counts for something.

Perhaps Sting was too strongly criticised for its off-the-wall titles, resulting in *Hexyz Force*, which plays it shockingly safe.

Chaos Rings

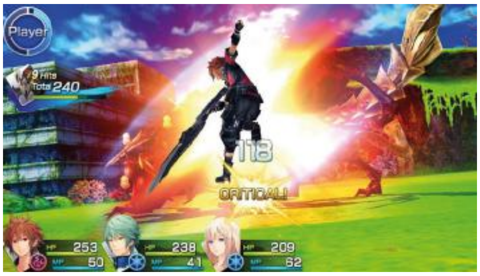
Developer: Media.Vision | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): IOS, AND, PSV

Released between 2010 and 2015, the *Chaos Rings* series, developed by Media.Vision and published by Square Enix, sold millions of copies worldwide. An original IP with rich, expansive 100+ hour stories offered as a premium-priced mobile series, it proved Square could replicate their console success in the smartphone space.

The series told stories adapted in scope and perspective to match the quicker play-throughs of a mobile session, while still retaining the feel of an epic console RPG. Each game's story is separate, but they generally focus on the idea of a great power threatening to destroy the world and a pair of heroes battling through dungeons to acquire the ability to stop it. The characters in the first three games (*I, 2, Omega*) were designed by Yusuke Naora (*Final Fantasy X, The Last Remnant*), and the stories vary depending on which pairing you chose.

The games play as fairly typical JRPGs, navigating overworlds and dungeons, and engaging in turn-based combat. Each team consists of two characters and in battle the player can choose to fight solo or as a pair. In pair mode the best attributes and attacks of both characters are combined, but both take damage. Battle features a Break Gauge that shifts with the outcome of attacks and, depending on its level, can increase the power of character attacks.

Despite the success of the series, *Chaos Rings* has largely vanished. Since May of 2016, only *Chaos Rings III* can still be purchased, at the time of writing. *Chaos Rings III* is the only game in the series ever released physically, on the Vita in Japan, with the first and second games, as well as *Omega,* available as downloadable DLC for this compilation.



While in demand on initial release, the smartphone focus of *Chaos Rings* caused the series to fall out of the popular consciousness.

Crimson Shroud

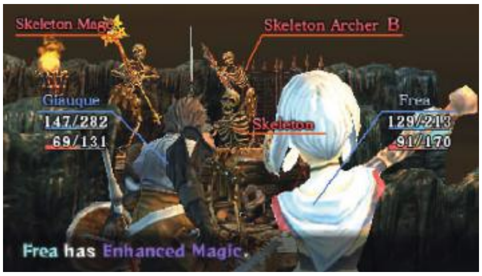
Developer: Level-5 | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): 3DS

Level-5's most interesting 3DS software was its auteur *Guild* project, which attached different game designers to small-scale games within a larger collection, each also released as an eShop stand-alone. This example, *Crimson Shroud,* is an RPG by Yasumi Matsuno of *Ogre* and *Ivalice* fame, once again working with Hitoshi Sakimoto and Alexander O. Smith. Matsuno uses the smaller budget to style the game as a virtual table-top play session. Characters and enemies are presented as figures placed on top of dioramas. Scene-setting text and sound plays whenever a room is entered, giving the game a bit of a sound-novel vibe too.

The tale focuses on a group of mercenaries tasked with finding a monk in a palace ruin. It might also house the First Gift, a powerful artefact that brought magic into the world. There are twists and revelations later on, while most of the early text is loaded with lore and world-building.

Crimson Shroud sports only about a dozen fights during its four chapters. Yet the underlying systems are deep, possibly even overkill, for such a short game. Success relies heavily on buffing and status ailments. There's a combo system when using the right elements. All character improvement is done through better gear instead of level-ups. Melding two pieces of equipment strengthens them further. Equipment comes with some skills; others are learned after battle. Certain actions even rely on the player literally throwing dice via the touch screen. Fights can get rather tough, and drag on.

These unique systems, and the strong narrative and atmosphere, made *Crimson Shroud* one of the best-rated *Guild* games, frequently popping up in recommendations for eShop games to play.



Frea has Enhanced Magic.

Crimson Shroud

Crimson Shroud* was released in Japan as part of the *Guild01* compilation, which also included Grasshopper's *Liberation Maiden.

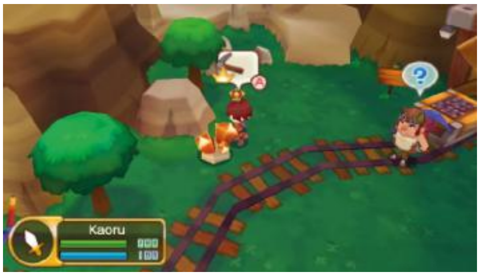
Fantasy Life

Developer: Level-5 | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): 3DS

Level-5's project for the booming life-sim and multiplayer handheld market was *Fantasy Life*. Originally planned for the DS, it actually came out on the 3DS many delays later. Brownie Brown, h.a.n.d., and other companies were by then involved, and it had names like Yoshitaka Amano and Nobuo Uematsu attached to it. A later, enhanced version was the basis for the Western release.

In terms of premise, things start to go wrong in a peaceful storybook-fantasy world when black stones fall from the sky, corrupting monsters wherever they land. The protagonist decides to investigate, earning a talkative butterfly companion on the way. It's a short and simple story that acts as charming window-dressing.

Living a fantasy life is the main point of the game. A Life in this case is a job, even if that sounds depressing. There are 12 classes to pick from, some fighters, some gatherers, others crafters, all integrated to enable mining and woodcutting for materials, tailoring them into equipment, and then wearing it when going out to fight monsters. Players can change Life at any time, the game encouraging mixing and matching of professions, or having multiplayer friends over to help.



FANTASY LIFE
NINTENDO 3DS

There's a lot to do in *Fantasy Life*, but not a lot of variety. The real-time fights are simple, as are the QTE crafting mini-games. So is gathering materials. Jobs can be ranked up, villager quests undertaken, rooms furnished. Your enjoyment of it relies heavily on whether you find this busywork frustratingly tedious or enjoyably addicting

The sequel, *Fantasy Life Online*, was only released in Japan, and on smartphones, a platform well suited to this style of game and its multiplayer aspect.

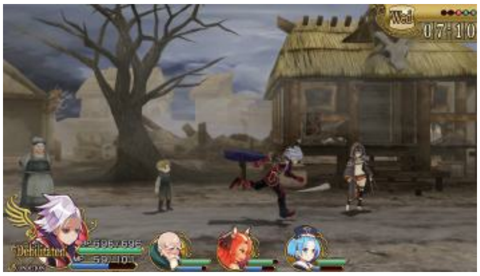
***Fantasy Life* falls into the same life simulation sub-genre as games like *Harvest Moon* and *Rune Factory*, though it still very much does its own thing.**

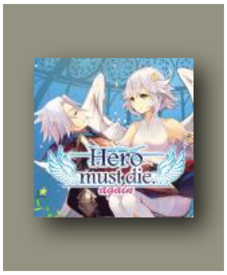
Hero Must Die

Developer: G-Mode/Pyramid | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): PSV, WIN, MOB

In *Hero Must Die*, the hero's standard journey ends not with the defeat of the demon lord, but with tearful eulogies for the hero himself. After seemingly saving the world, this RPG's hero faces imminent death, and it's up to players to make the most of his final five days.

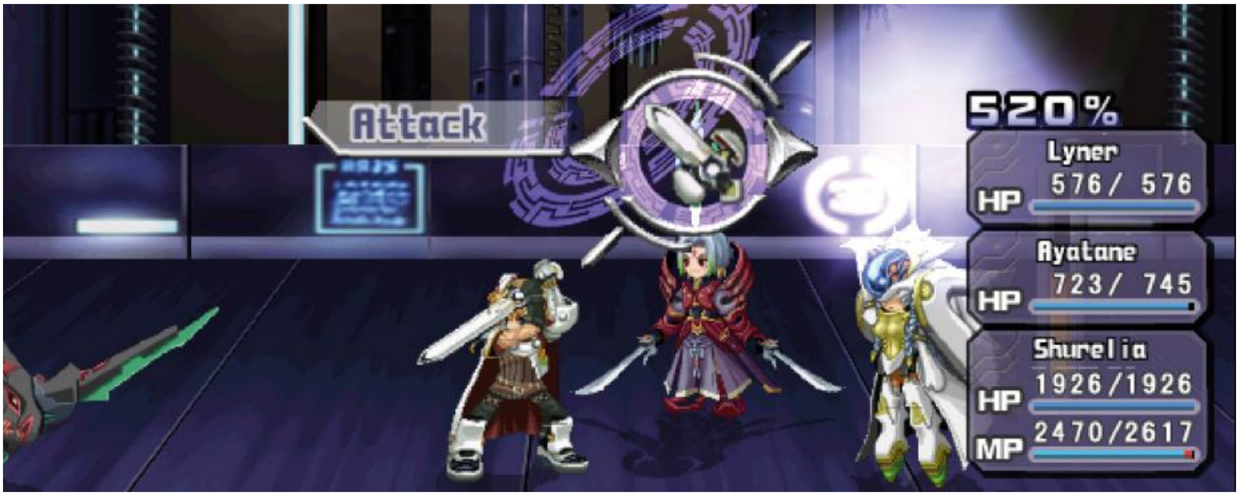
This original concept is by Shoji Masuda, known for unusual RPGs like *Linda*^{3} and *Ore no Shikabane o Koete Yuke*, and is based on the experience of seeing his own father's condition deteriorate as he dealt with his shortened life expectancy. The hero starts out powerful, but as time passes his stats decrease, his strongest equipment becomes too heavy to wear and he starts to forget magic. This forces him to rely on other party members in the game's turn-based battles. Each character has their own quest, so it takes clever time management and a lot of trial and error to aid all these allies and change the country's fate after the hero passes away. The characters are colourful, but the premise is bleak. The setting was reportedly inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall, with lingering racial and cultural problems that can't be solved by simply slaying the final boss.





The five days fly by in just a few hours, but *Hero Must Die* is based around replaying the game multiple times. Each funeral leaves a lingering sense of regret that things could have gone differently. The scope is still small, but this was originally a cellphone game, released in 2007, then eventually remade for the PlayStation Vita. It was finally released in English on an assortment of platforms in 2020, now known under the name *Hero Must Die. Again*. It's simple and repetitive, but with its clever twists on familiar tropes, the game shows the power of RPGs to present deeply personal stories.

While most of Shoji Masuda's games were not released in English, this latecomer mobile port will at least allow an international audience to experience his unique design philosophies.



Ar tonelico

Developer: Gust | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PS2, PS3, PSV

Aside from *Atelier*, Gust had one other big RPG series – *Ar tonelico*. Taking a different approach from that flagship series, the *Ar tonelico* trilogy takes place in a world called Ar Ciels, which was nearly destroyed by a cataclysmic event. Special beings called Reyvateils inhabit this world, and they're able to use Song Magic for both attack and defence. The *Ar tonelico* series visits each of Ar Ciel's three remaining inhabitable regions, during which the player learns more about what happened, and eventually restores the land.

The *Ar tonelico* titles adhere pretty closely to the classic JRPG formula, with a few exceptions. The implementation of Song Magic is not like casting spells in most JRPGs. When Singing, a Reyvateil will lose MP over time, while continuing to either charge the Song or continue its effect, depending on the Song itself. The other party members are mainly there to protect the Reyvateil while she Sings. The battle systems of the three games differ, but these core mechanics stay the same.

The other defining feature of the *Ar tonelico* titles involves the Reyvateils themselves. In order for one to learn new Song Magic, the protagonist must Dive into their Cosmosphere, which is essentially the Reyvateil's subconscious. Players must help the Reyvateils overcome their insecurities and past traumas in order to learn Song Magic. This, combined with other mechanics, like the highly suggestive Install process, make the bonds between the protagonist and Reyvateil extremely intimate.

The first *Ar tonelico* title, *Ar tonelico: The Melody of Elemia,* introduces players to the world of Ar Ciel and the First Tower of Ar tonelico, which keeps the landmass floating above the Sea of Death. It isn't until *Ar tonelico II: The Melody of Metafalica* that the existence of multiple floating countries is revealed, as this second game takes place in the area surrounding the Second Tower. *Ar tonelico Qoga: Knell of Ar Ciel* takes place in the area surrounding the Third Tower.

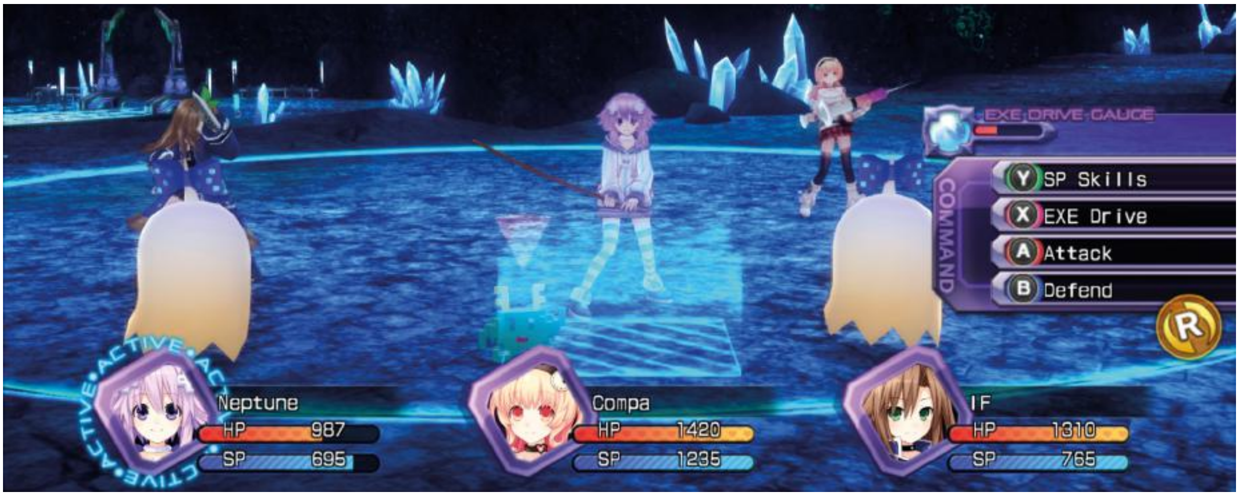
Cloche
We declare war on the Goddess!

These three games tell a continuous story about the world of Ar Ciel, and eventually about the catastrophe that destroyed the planet and the botched plans to revive it. The video games and other media reveal an extensive amount of unique lore for the universe of EXA_PICO, including the creation of Reyvateils, the meaning of Hymnos, and much, much more.

There are two other games that take place in the same universe. The *Surge Concerto* series consists of *Ciel nosurge* and *Ar nosurge: Ode to an Unborn Star*. While these games do share a universe with *Ar tonelico* and *Ar Ciel*, *Ciel nosurge* takes place mostly on a different planet, until it's destroyed. The remainder of *Ciel nosurge* and *Ar nosurge* take place on the colony ship Soreil. Despite some overlap, particularly in the existence of Song Magic, the two series are ultimately separate.

PlayStation 2
Ar tonelico

Gust games are known for their stellar soundtracks, and *Ar tonelico* is no exception – the vocal songs, with eccentric names like "EXEC_CHRONICLE_KEY/", are sung in the fictional language of Hymnos.



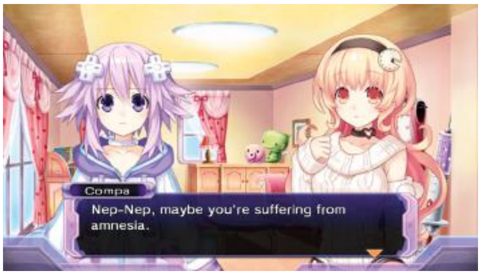
Hyperdimension Neptunia (series)

Developer: Compile Heart | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): PS3, PS4, PSV, WIN

Fanboys call their vehement arguments over the merits of video game platforms "Console Wars". Compile Heart's *Hyperdimension Neptunia* takes it more literally, as it takes place in the sci-fi/fantasy world of Gamindustri, which is populated by four goddesses that vie for control. Each of these regions (and its associated goddess) is based on an actual video game console: Lastation (Sony PlayStation), Lowee (Nintendo Wii), and Leanbox (Microsoft Xbox), for example. The main heroine is Neptune, hailing from Planeptune – she's supposed to represent SEGA, as "Neptune" was the codename for their 32-bit console before it was officially changed to the Saturn. In her default form, she's a somewhat ditzy girl, affectionately called Nep-Nep, but under the right circumstances, she can transform into the far more serious (and more powerful) Purple Heart.

Half of *Neptunia*'s appeal is in the video game in-jokes – other characters are anthropomorphic versions of game companies like Gust (*Atelier*), Nippon Ichi (*Disgaea*), Red (*Tengai Makyou*), Cave (many hardcore arcade shoot-'em-ups) and even Idea Factory, the game's publisher. Enemies include *Pac-Man*-type ghosts and *Space Invader*-type aliens; Nep-Nep hums the *Final Fantasy* victory theme and quotes the famously terrible Saturn light-gun game *Death Crimson*. The other main draw is the game's large number of super-cutesy girls, often scantily clad or in tight clothing, with chests that jiggle ludicrously.

As for how the games play ... it almost doesn't matter. The original *Hyperdimension Neptunia* was outright junk, with awful visuals that ran at a terrible frame rate. Subsequent games fixed up the technical issues and improved the battle system, making it similar to the standard Compile Heart setup, in which you move characters around a battlefield in a turn-based fashion and then hit buttons to execute combo attacks, powering up for CPU Transformations (magical-girl form changes). Much of the game just involves running around bland environments, towards your goals, and attacking anything that gets near.


Compa

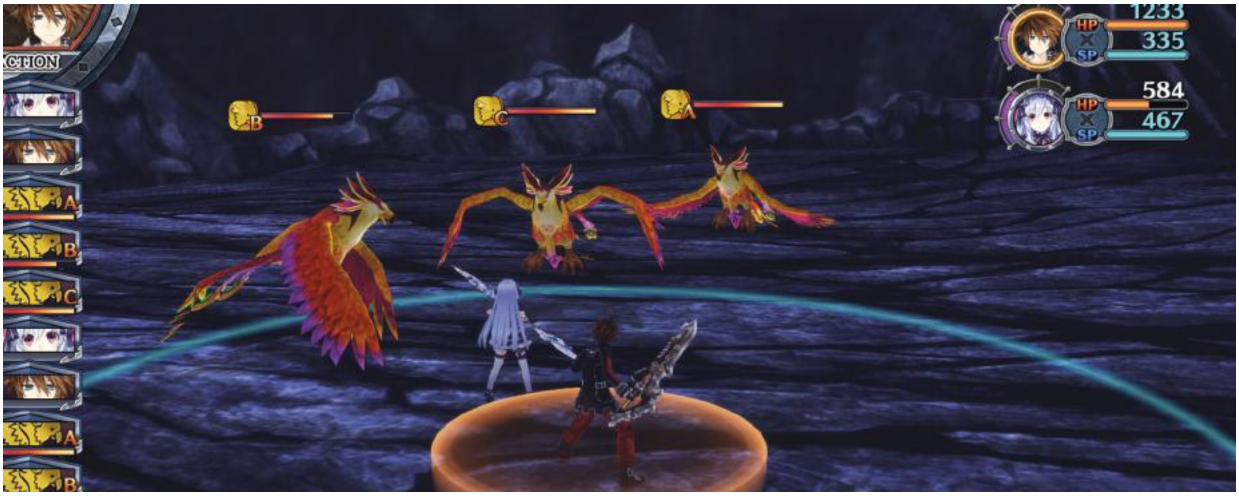
Nep-Nep, maybe you're suffering from amnesia.

PS3
HYPERDIMENSION
NEPTUNIA

Focusing on attractive female characters at the expense of solid gameplay has long been Idea Factory's schtick, but there's no doubt that they happened into a winning formula with the *Neptunia* games – the game portions aren't exactly good, but they're just tolerable filler between the bits where brightly coloured girls make obscure video game references. As a result, it's a very love-it-or-hate-it series.

It also suffers from some absolutely arcane sequel names. After *Hyperdimension Neptunia*, the sequels are *mk2*, and then *Victory*. This first set was remade as *Re;Birth*, *Re;Birth2*, and *Re;Birth3*, respectively; this was followed up by *Megadimension Neptunia VII*, later remade as *VIIR*, which adds a VR mode but worsens everything else. Compile Heart has been milking this setup for all kinds of entries in different genres, including idol-cultivating sims, bullet-hell shooters, strategy RPGs, action RPGs, and even a crossover with *SEGA Hard Girls*, which features SEGA consoles as cutesy girls.

The *Neptunia* series epitomises most of Idea Factory's and Compile Heart's output – lots of cheap games featuring cutesy girls, hastily assembled and quickly produced to satisfy a small but reliable fanbase.



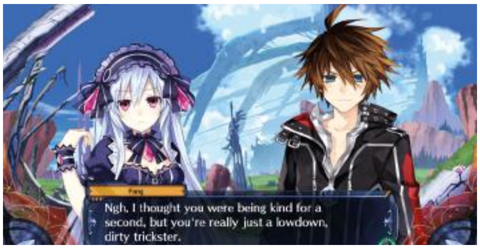
Fairy Fencer F

Developer: Compile Heart | Released: 2013 | Platform(s): PS3, PS4, WIN

There's a phenomenon in Japanese technology lovingly referred to by domestic economists as the "Galápagos": when a unique or forward-thinking idea is successful within Japan, but does not catch on internationally. The term was initially used to refer to Japanese mobile phones of the early 2000s, which had many abilities and features that wouldn't be seen elsewhere until smartphones came along. Compile Heart, recognising their niche with the success of *Hyperdimension Neptunia*, created the "Galápagos RPG" label for their projects in 2013. The idea was to emphasise that their output was intended for Japanese audiences, though most were released internationally anyway.

Fairy Fencer F was the first game to bear the Galápagos RPG moniker. Developed largely by the team behind the *Neptunia* games, Compile Heart brought in a few pinch hitters: namely, Yoshitaka Amano and Nobuo Uematsu. The former designed the game's logo and the concept art for the story's two duelling gods, while the latter composed the theme song. The (very minor) presence of two *Final Fantasy* alumni, coupled with the title's F-based alliteration, did not go unnoticed by audiences, though *Fairy Fencer F* could not be any more dissimilar.

Instead, it is pure, undiluted Compile Heart. It's lighthearted, bawdy, and laden with cheesecake, and its characters interact exclusively through argument. Our hero is the misanthropic Fang, a food-motivated chauvinist who ends up pulling a magical sword from a stone. By doing so he releases Eryn, a magical fairy seeking the revival of a long-dead Goddess. By pulling her sword, Fang has become her Fencer, a guardian able to channel Eryn's power to transform into a cyborg-like being. Soon Fang is joined on his quest by other Fencers, such as Tiara, a selfish treasure hunter with a masochistic streak.

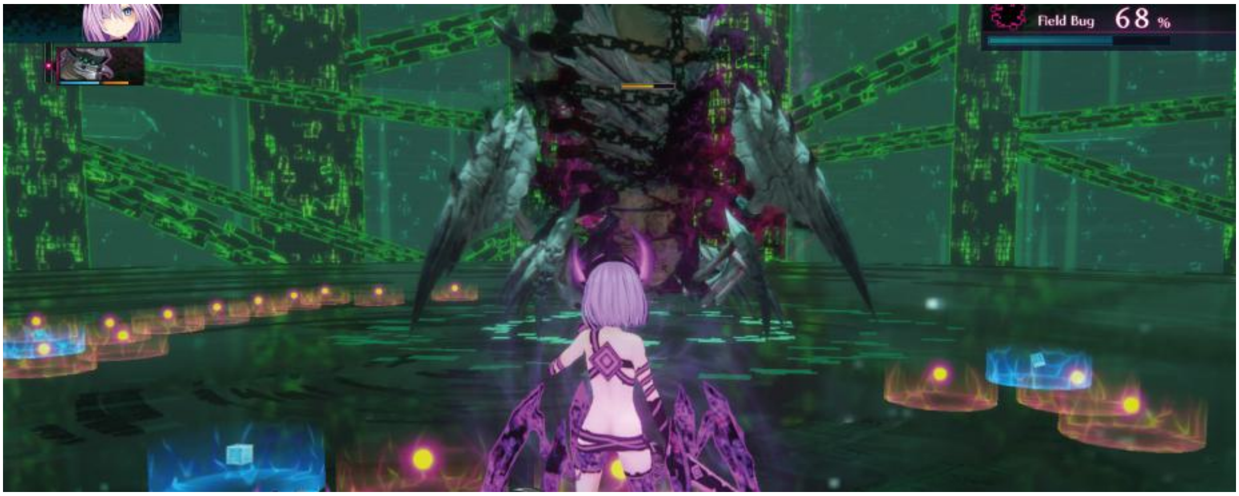

Fang

Ngh, I thought you were being kind for a second, but you're really just a lowdown, dirty trickster.

The main loop is Fang's search for Furies, latent spirits found throughout the world. The dungeons the party searches are all fairly similar: wide-open environments filled with monsters and dotted with the occasional treasure. Once a Fury is found, it can be used to begin reviving the Goddess (or her nemesis, the Vile God) to gain a few extra abilities, and can then be equipped for stat bonuses or stabbed into the map to bestow additional risk/reward factors on a dungeon. Like many of Compile Heart's titles, *Fairy Fencer F* is essentially a reskinned *Neptunia* game, with combat largely unchanged. Each Fencer has the ability to transform into a super-powered state, but this is functionally identical to *Neptunia's* CPU Transformations.

There are some neat ideas in *Fairy Fencer F* – particularly related to the evil corporation pulling the strings – but the problem is that any interesting plot beats are immediately undercut by the script's refusal to take anything remotely seriously. The game received an updated re-release in 2015, subtitled *Advent Dark Force*, which features extra characters and dungeons, and multiple story paths dependent on the revival of the Goddess or the Vile God. Being a Compile Heart game, it's also loaded to the gills with Level 900 superbosses for those who just can't get enough.

***Fairy Fencer F* was Compile Heart's first attempt at a "legitimate" RPG, in that it's not just filled with cutesy girls, instead having a roughly 50:50 gender ratio. It doesn't entirely succeed, but the effort is noted.**



Death end re;Quest

Developer: Compile Heart | Released: 2018 | Platform(s): PS4, WIN

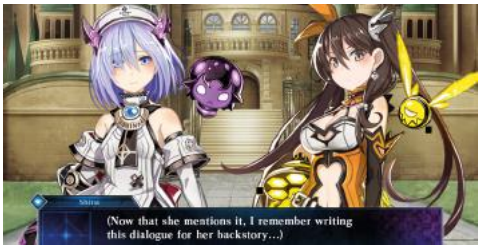
Game developer Shina Ninomiya disappears mysteriously one day, only to wake up inside of *World's Odyssey*, the MMORPG she was working on. It was never completed or released, but its advanced design has caused the game world to take on a life of its own. She is able to communicate with her co-worker, a young man named Arata Mizunashi, who aids her from the real world. The only way to save her is to unlock the true ending, further complicated by the fact that the software has evolved into malware and begins infecting computer systems worldwide.

As Shina moves through the game world, you discover that *Death End re;Quest* is a lot like other Compile Heart games. You explore dungeons, fight enemies, and eventually meet up with other NPCs who join your party … these, in true Compile Heart fashion, are all cutesy girls. However, your progress will be regularly blocked, so you need to switch to Arata's view. Taking place in modern day Tokyo, these segments play out like a visual novel, with minimal interaction. Since *World's Odyssey* was never completed, it's pretty glitchy, and Arata finds ways to tune the programming to allow Shina to proceed. This bugginess manifests itself in other ways, as most characters (including the heroines) are infected with literal digital bugs, plus some enemies are clearly incomplete 3D models. It's also intentionally unbalanced, as items will occasionally be extremely over-powered; this off-kilter difficulty is thus internally justified.

There are also a large number of "bad ends" that follow wrong decisions. Many of these are just a few brief lines of text, but there are also some that are incredibly gruesome, as the digital heroines are decapitated, dismembered, crucified, or otherwise mutilated. The script was written by *Corpse Party* scribe Makoto Kedouin, who seems to have a knack for this sort of thing. These are actually presented as "game overs", so you need to load a saved game when one is triggered; you can, however, save regularly.

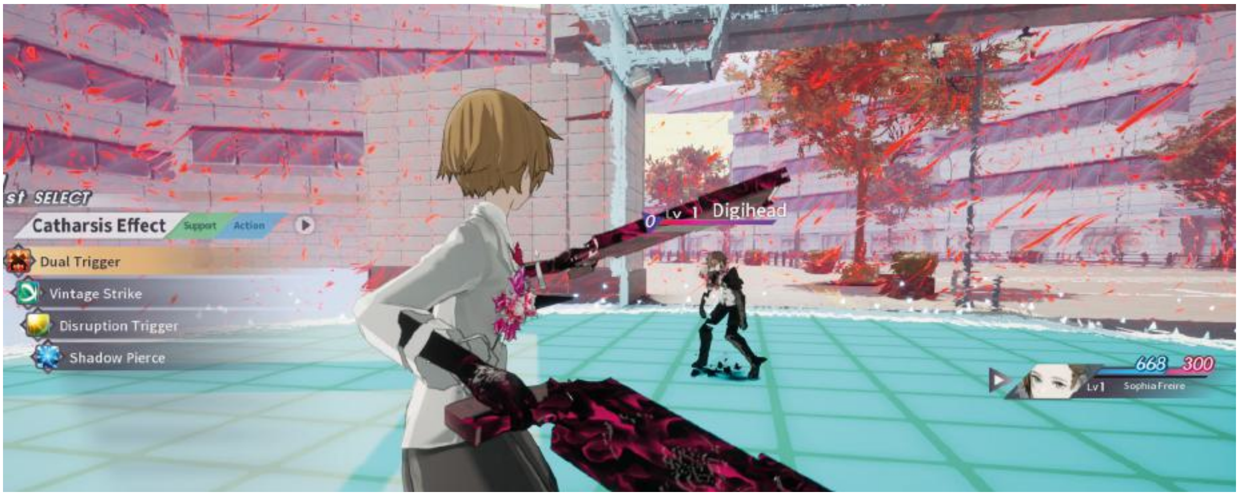
The battle system is pretty fun, since you can knock enemies around the battlefield, banging them into other enemies or the sides of the arena. You can toss them towards friends, who'll deliver another blow that deflects them again. There are also glowing bits lying around, which damage your characters but increase their Corruption – at a high enough level, this triggers Glitch mode, which strips them of most of their clothes but allows a super-powerful attack. When half of these bits have been cleared, Arata can also use various special moves, including mini-games featuring various video-game genres, like third-person shooters or puzzle games.

As a hybrid RPG-visual novel, *Death End re;Quest* does feel disjointed, as it bounces between its disparate elements. It does suffer from the usual low-budget Compile Heart issues, and reading about cutesy girls getting murdered in various ways is pretty uncomfortable. But otherwise, the story is pretty good, the battle system is a lot of fun, and while the moe elements are present, they don't overwhelm the game, making it one of Compile Heart's better titles.


(Now that she mentions it, I remember writing this dialogue for her backstory...)

PS4
Death end re;Quest

The concept of an MMORPG gone mad is well-trodden territory, with anime and games like *.hack* and *Sword Art Online*, though there are enough changes to the formula to make *Death end re:Quest* stand out.



The Caligula Effect

Developer: Aquira | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PS4, PSV, NSW, WIN

The Caligula Effect begins with your character living a seemingly idyllic high-school life. But it's all a trick, more or less, as you're inside of a virtual reality simulation called Mobius, basically a place where regular people can escape from the misery of their daily lives. The catch here is that no one can leave, due to the tyranny of a virtual idol called Myu. The protagonist joins a group called the Go-Home Club, who want to find a way to escape back to reality, while facing off against Digiheads, a cult that has formed around the siren call of Myu.

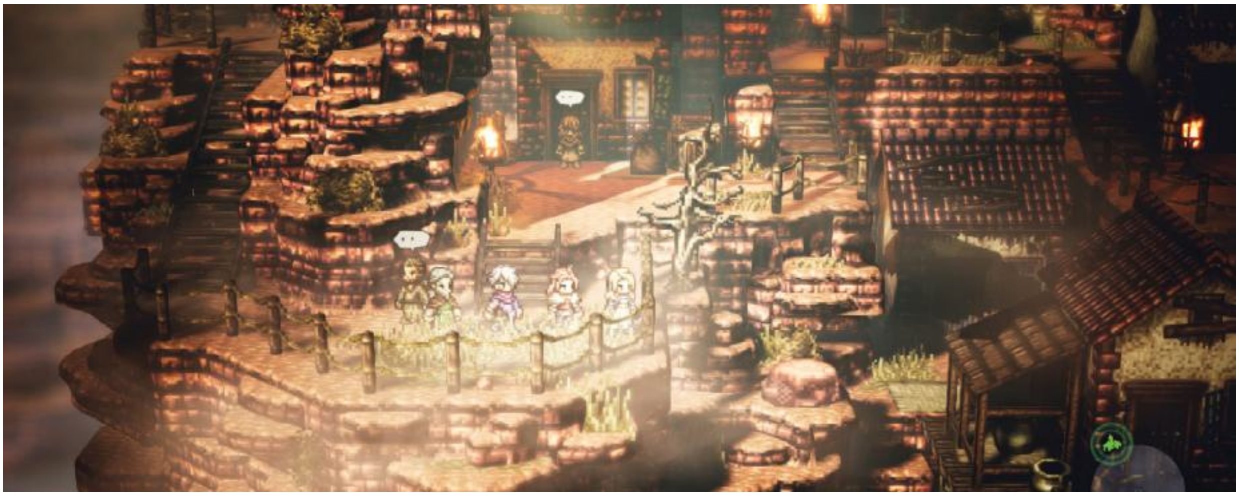
The story was written by Tadashi Satomi, who had originally worked on the first two *Persona* games, though his last involvement with Atlus was with the *Digital Devil Saga* duology. It's meant to be a deconstruction of the high-school life sims popular in the Japanese gaming sphere, as most of the core members of the Go-Home Club have lived harsh lives, dealing with themes like suicide and teen pregnancy. In the real world, the faces behind those well-dressed high-school anime avatars are very different, often older, and sometimes of opposite genders. You learn their tragic backstories as you continue through the story. There's also an expanded social sim, as you can technically befriend the 500 or so NPCs within Mobius, though the interactions are obviously shallow. The enhanced *Overdose* version, published for additional platforms, also includes an optional story branch in which the main character joins the bad guys, a crew called the Ostinato Musicians.

The battle system is like a JRPG take on the flashy fight scenes found in 3D action games like *Devil May Cry*. The flow moves in semi-real-time, but when a character's turn pops up, they can execute up to three actions. Before you commit, you're given a preview of how all of the moves will play out (there is a chance they can miss, after all), allowing you to reassess, if you can think of a better plan. Since foes often need to charge before executing attacks, you can pull off acrobatic moves, or just run, to get out of harms way, or try to get enemies into groups to hit several at once ... and, of course, hit them or spatter them with bullets. You are limited by an SP gauge, so you may need to take a turn to recharge.

The Calgiula Effect is the sort of game that works better on paper than in practice. The main cast of characters relies on tragic backstories in place of memorable characters, and some of its harsher themes aren't exactly handled well. The battle system is pretty fun at first, and it's fantastic in boss battles, but just takes too long in regular encounters, since they're pretty easy (though auto-battle helps this). The repetitive dungeons and bland character models and animation also reveal its origins as a Vita game. The music is cool though, with instrumental tunes that gain lyrics when playing during combat; the music is by Tsukasa Masuko, one of the original *Megami Tensei* composers. While the game's ambitions are to be admired, ultimately it fails to achieve them. There was also a tie-in anime in 2018.

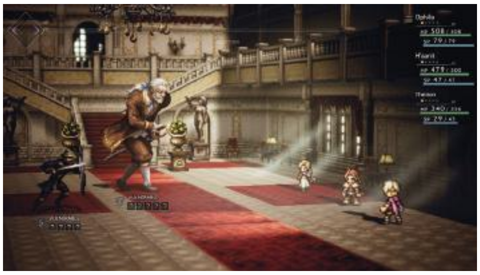
PS4
Caligula Effect
OVERDOSE
M

According to the developers the "Caligula effect", also known as taboo psychology, refers to the desire to see and do prohibited things.



Octopath Traveler

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2018 | Platform(s): NSW, WIN



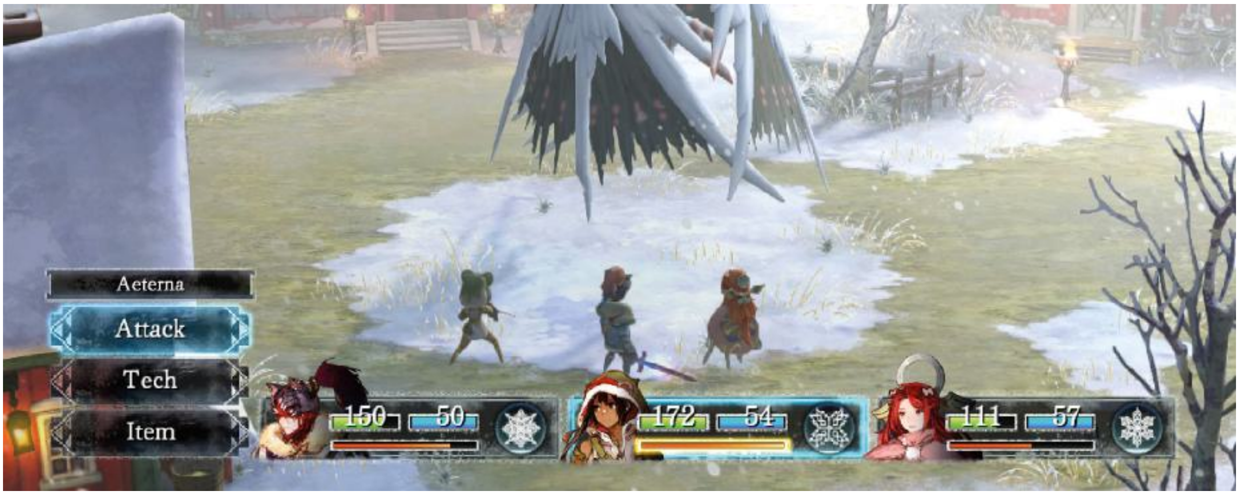
One of the arranged soundtracks for *Octopath Traveler* features some tracks in a 16-bit retro style, and it's pretty amazing to hear the main battle tune done like a *Romancing SaGa* SFC game.

Octopath Traveler follows in the footsteps of other retro throwbacks from Square Enix, like *Final Fantasy: The 4 Heroes of Light* and *Bravely Default*. This time, it's a little more inspired by the *SaGa* series, at least narratively. At the outset, you choose from eight different characters, all in the land of Orsterra, with varying jobs and abilities. There are typical RPG characters like H'aanit the hunter and Therion the thief, as well as some that recall *Dragon Quest IV*, such as Primrose the dancer and Tressa the merchant. But there are also a few more unusual ones, like Alfyn the apothecary and Cyrus the scholar. Whoever you pick is merely the starting character, as once you've played their opening chapter, you're free to roam around the world gathering others, playing their storylines, and joining them all together.

The striking visual style uses 2D sprites reminiscent of *Final Fantasy VI*, while the backgrounds are rendered to look like a three-dimensional version of a SNES game, using an effect called HD-2D. Combined with some heavy depth-of-field and colour filters, it stands out from other nostalgic throwbacks on this factor alone. But it also pays homage in other ways, particularly the over-sized human boss sprites in battle, a curious artistic quirk of the era. The music is all orchestrated, with live instruments, and is consistently astounding.

The battle system is similar to *Bravely Default*'s, as can you store up Boost stocks that allow you to attack several times (up to four) in a single turn. Each enemy has various weaknesses (weapon or elemental), and if you target these repeatedly, you can Break them, stunning them and dropping their defences. So the ideal flow is to store up stocks, Break an enemy, then unleash your stored attacks to inflict maximum damage. The combat has impact, thanks to the visual effects, like the glow when charging up, or the way that each blow feels like an explosion. It's fun, though the game does feature random battles, which can really only be lessened with one character's skill. In addition to regular combat abilities, each character has Path abilities that can manipulate NPCs in various ways, like challenging them to combat, stealing from them, or leading them into battle.

Octopath Traveler makes a great first impression, but that wears down as it goes along. Each chapter focuses on a single character, and while some of their stories are pretty good, the party members don't really interact with one another. While the various plot threads eventually converge, everything still feels so unconnected that the narrative lacks emotional impact. And while the writing is pretty good, if a little overwrought, the voice acting is shockingly poor. Progression also gets caught up in a repetitive cycle – run around the world, find a chapter, enter a town, perform a task, then do the next one. Those familiar with the multi-character, open-ended storytelling of the *SaGa* games will likely feel at home, but anyone expecting the kind of stories found in a *Final Fantasy* game may be disappointed.



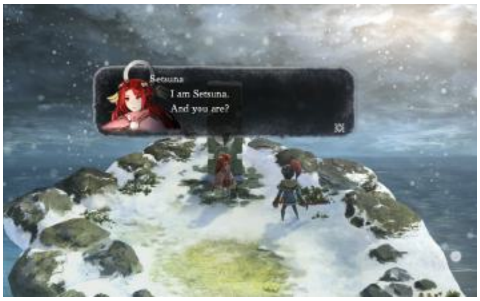
I am Setsuna

Developer: Square Enix/Tokyo RPG Factory | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PS4, NSW, WIN

Square Enix had long been cognisant of a certain type of JRPG fan, who longed for the simpler days of the 16-bit era. In order to cater to these gamers, they created a subsidiary called Tokyo RPG Factory. Its first game was the 2016 release *I am Setsuna*. The protagonist is a mercenary named Endir, sent to assassinate a girl named Setsuna. He falters, as she seems to be defenceless, and ends up getting captured. As it turns out, Setsuna is about to begin a pilgrimage across the land, which will end with her sacrificing her life to save her village from monsters. She hires Emir as one of her guards, and sets off.

The basic setup is rather similar to that of *Final Fantasy X* (though it's more upfront about Setsuna's fate) but in most other ways, the game takes direct inspiration from *Chrono Trigger*. The overhead perspective and battle system are almost identical, right down to using three characters in combat, the Active Time Battle system, and the inclusion of Double and Triple Techs. Combat does have a little more depth, as once a character is ready to act, you can have them charge up Momentum stars, which lets them enhance other actions, like inflicting extra damage when attacking. There's also a system whereby you can craft Spritnite crystals, which grant bonuses and allow the use of various spells and abilities.

I am Setsuna takes place on a series of islands that seem stuck in a perpetual snowstorm, giving it a very cold, wintry feel. The soundtrack is played entirely on piano, which again gives the adventure a very distinctive atmosphere. However, in tying itself so strongly to this sole identity, the game can't offer much variation, as everything is just white towns and forests and mountains, and the music tracks begin to blend together.


Setsuna
I am Setsuna.
And you are?

I am Setsuna.

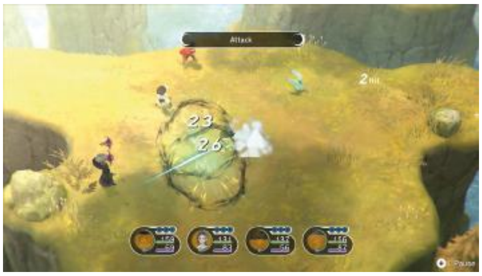
While the storytelling is cognisant of many elements of 16-bit RPGs – the dialogue is short and straightforward, and the pacing reasonably quick – it lacks many of the small things that made classic games so enamouring. Indeed, despite basing its gameplay systems around *Chrono Trigger*, anyone expecting something with a similar tone will be greatly disappointed. The characters are interesting, and the story has a good twist or two, but everything just feels rather joyless, and it just needs something to make it feel more alive. Additionally, Square also produced games like *Bravely Default* and *Octopath Traveler*, both paying tribute to their earlier days but with more compelling scenarios and more interesting mechanics, and both ending up as much superior games. If *I am Setsuna* had been released during the 16-bit days, it would've been considered a minor classic – it has a forlorn sense about it that wasn't commonly seen at the time – but in a modern context, it's just rather average.

After *I am Setsuna*, Tokyo RPG Factory developed a few other throwback projects: *Lost Sphear*, which is very much the follow-up to *I am Setsuna*, and *Oninaki*, a slightly more ambitious action RPG.

Tokyo RPG Factory was pretty much set up to create retro-style RPGs with a more modern sheen. However, it's arguable as to how successful they've been.

Lost Sphear

Developer: Square Enix/Tokyo RPG Factory | Released: 2018 | Platform(s): PS4, NSW



LOST SPHEAR

With its snowy setting and subdued piano music, Tokyo RPG Factory's first game, *I am Setsuna*, was an exercise in restraint. Despite its tepid reception, it wasn't too long until Square Enix's offshoot studio had its second release ready. *Lost Sphear* takes many concepts and elements from *I Am Setsuna* but offers more of everything – except restraint.

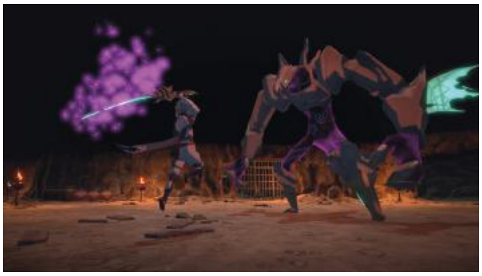
There are more characters, more different biomes, and a lot more game mechanics. When huge chunks of the world disappear into white nothingness, it's up to hero Kanata and his colourful crew to bring back all that is lost. The key is memories found all over the world. Sometimes it's memory fragments won in battle, sometimes it's big, important memories found in important places, guarded by big, nasty bosses. Just like *I am Setsuna*, *Lost Sphear* borrows its basic combat mechanics from *Chrono Trigger*, this time infusing battles with a dash of *Grandia*. Fighting enemies, using the Momentum system, which grants you additional attacks and manoeuvres, is certainly the best part of *Lost Sphear*. Elsewhere, the game gets bogged down by serious feature-creep in its secondary systems. There's crafting, there are mecha-suits, there's food-related buffs; however, many of these mechanics feel underused during the pleasantly brief playtime of roughly 20 to 25 hours.

Still, with a charming party, a nice premise only a JRPG could come up with and a fun battle system, *Lost Sphear* is RPG comfort food through and through. It won't be near the top on anybody's best-RPG-ever list, but it's a fun adventure that sometimes really achieves what its developers originally set out to do: capture the spirit of the golden days of 16-bit adventures.

While sharing many commonalities with *I am Setsuna*, this follow-up is generally an improvement, if still not exactly anything special.

Oninaki

Developer: Square Enix/Tokyo RPG Factory | Released: 2019 | Platform(s): NSW, PS4, WIN



The third release from Tokyo RPG Factory saw old-school Square veteran Takashi Tokita come aboard as creative producer, and the result was a more intimate piece that refreshingly broke from its predecessors' devotion to the 16-bit era.

Oninaki, a contraction of "Oni no Naku Kuni" ("Country where Ogres Cry"), is an action RPG set in a world that worships the cycle of death and rebirth. Kagachi is a Watcher, a sort of government-sanctioned exorcist detective, tasked with solving cases in which the cycle finds itself threatened. Each chapter focuses on a different case, in which Kagachi helps regretful spirits sever their bonds with the mortal realm, or tracks down a criminal seeking to subvert the cycle to their own ends. Eventually, Kagachi finds himself on the trail of a supernatural killer targetting other Watchers.

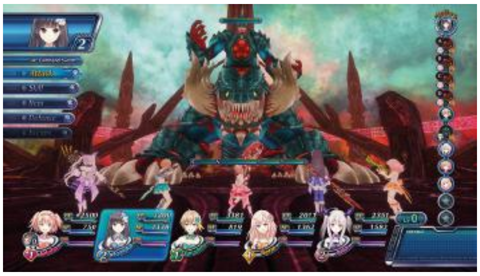
To aid him in his duties, Kagachi is accompanied by Daemons, the lingering spirits of legendary warriors. Daemons allow the Watchers to freely travel between the mortal and spirit realms, and also bestow the mystic weapons capable of banishing corrupted spirits. Kagachi starts out with Aisha, a katana expert specialising in hack-and-slash and evasion, while others found later wield scythes for crowd control, twin firearms for distance combat, and so on. Daemons are upgraded using materials awarded through combat, which unlock additional attacks as well as memories of each Daemon's tragic past.

Oninaki's solemn tone doesn't always hit the mark; for every monologue extolling appreciation of life's fleeting nature, there's a quest in which you help euthanise a depressed person. Still, for all its flaws, *Oninaki* is Tokyo RPG Factory at its best, and proof that it can be more than its unfortunate studio name suggests.

***Oninaki* shifts gears, being more of an action RPG, and brings with it a spark of excitement missing from the developer's previous works.**

Omega Quintet

Developer: Compile Heart | Released: 2014 | Platform(s): PS4, WIN



PS4
Omega Quintet

The world has been consumed by a mysterious, fog-like phenomenon called the Blare, devastating much of humanity. However, a small number of girls are immune to its powers, and are chosen to join an idol group known as the Verse Maidens. *Omega Quintet* follows new member Otoha and her male buddy (and manager) Takt as they become acquainted with their new roles, and fight back to save the Earth.

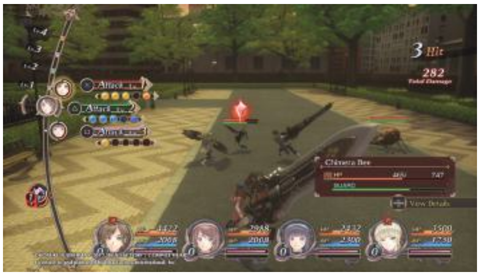
The game calls itself a "hybrid idol simulation", but that's really overselling it. There's a mode where you can create your own dance videos, but in essence it's similar to most other Compile Heart games, so you take on missions, roam through boring maps, and fight bad guys. The battle system is the strongest aspect of the game, marking it out as different from that in the *Neptunia* games. Enemies sit on several different rows, with each of the Maidens' (many) attacks having different ranges. You can chain different attacks together, though depending on what you use, this can mean that the character's next turn will be delayed. Under certain circumstances, you can also activate Harmonics, which allow multiple Maidens to work together to use special skills.

The battle system is uniquely complex and pretty well designed; too bad everything around it is quite poor. The story and writing are awful, with each of the main characters following typical moe stereotypes, and the dialogue is almost impressively tedious. The structure is dull, the dungeons are boring, the music isn't anything special, despite the game's idol theme, and the "feature" whereby characters' costumes are ripped when taking damage is typical of the trashy stuff Compile Heart is known for.

While many *Compile Heart* games borrow *Neptunia*'s battle system, *Omega Quintet* tries something different, and mostly does a good job with it. But everything else about it ...

Dark Rose Valkyrie

Developer: Compile Heart | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PS4, WIN



PS4
Dark Rose Valkyrie

Dark Rose Valkyrie brought in artist Kosuke Fujishima and writer Takumi Miyajima, both known for the *Tales* series, though the game is actually similar to *Sakura Wars,* another work Fujishima is associated with. The world has been infected by a virus that turns people into monsters called Chimeras, and the protagonist, Asahi Shiramine, joins a group called the Valkyries to fight them. Since the virus tends to affect men more strongly, most of your compatriots are women. In between combat, you can chat and increase your trust bonds with them.

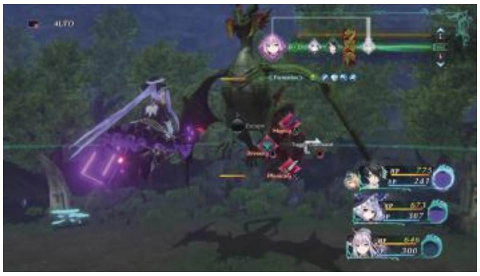
The game plays like *Omega Quintet*, as you get missions from your base, then run around assorted dungeons to kill baddies or hunt for items. The combat system is its biggest strength, similar to *Grandia*'s, in that the action flows in real-time, so you must coordinate your fighter's attacks to perform combos, breaking an enemy's guard to lower their defences, or knocking them back to slow them down. It's fun, though like other Compile Heart games, it's very unbalanced. Plus this is not enough to distract from the fact that the missions are tedious romps around boring environments.

The story is typical anime harem stuff, though not necessarily bad. The virus causes split personalities, which makes for some unusual conversations. But there's also a gimmick, à la *Ace Attorney* – one of the characters (randomly chosen when you start) is a traitor, and you regularly need to interrogate them and examine their dialogue for inconsistencies. Your bonds determine how many questions you can ask, though the specific questions are randomised. Successfully negotiating these is key to getting the best ending, but it all feels so haphazard. Despite some good ideas, nothing about this game comes together.

Dark Rose Valkyrie desperately wants to be a *Sakura Wars* game, even inventing an excuse, a virus, as to why your party members are largely female.

Dragon Star Varnir

Developer: Compile Heart | Released: 2018 | Platform(s): PS4, WIN



Like *Fairy Fencer F*, *Dragon Star Varnir* is another attempt by Compile Heart to reach an audience outside of their hardcore moe stuff.

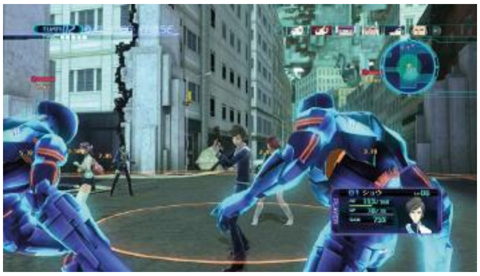
In the world of *Dragon Star Varnir*, witches are afflicted with a curse that forces them to become vessels for the birth of dragons … or go mad. After a dragon hunt goes wrong, Zephy, a witch-hunting knight, is rescued by the witches Minessa and Karikaro, who make him drink dragon blood in order to save him. Unexpectedly, this transfusion of blood turns Zephy into a witch, and he is forced to leave his past life behind and join the witches. In time, his perspective on life is challenged, and it becomes his mission to assist the witches in finding a way to break their curse, while also fighting the empire that he once belonged to.

The battle system features turn-based combat with three tiers of elevation; characters can move between these to avoid damage and use mêlée attacks. Players need to devour conquered dragons in order to power themselves up, and doing so will reward them with varied skill trees that provide stat improvements and new abilities to use. The story of the game is also influenced by how the player manages the witches' curse – you'll need dragon meat to satiate the witches' little sisters and the dragons within them, the clock ticking with every step you take. Spend too long grinding or exploring and you'll need to hunt down the little sisters you once cared for.

It remains to be seen whether *Dragon Star Varnir* signifies a change in Compile Heart's future approach – while it still features plenty of cutesy, often scantily clad girls, it's a darker and bolder vision of JRPGs than their typical fare, with experimental ideas that may appeal to those sceptical of their usual output. The music is decent, with contributions by Zizz Studio (which also worked on *Dark Rose Valkyrie*) along with the famed Motoi Sakuraba.

Lost Dimension

Developer: Lancarse | Released: 2014 | Platform(s): PS3, PSV, WIN



Some of the 11 characters that form your squad in *Lost Dimension* are interesting, and it's a bummer when one you like ends up betraying you.

A substantial amount of the world has been devastated, thanks to a mysterious terrorist called The End, who inhabits a five-floor tower called the Pillar. A group of young adult psychics, part of a group called S.E.A.L.E.D., is sent in to stop him before he can cause any more damage. However, among the team's eleven members, five are actually traitors. The rub is that, outside of the first time you play, the traitors are randomised thus they're different for every player.

Every time you ascend to a new layer of the Pillar, one of your party members must be sacrificed, decided by a vote among your squad; obviously, the goal is to sacrifice one of the traitors. Sho, the protagonist, can use his precognition abilities to suss out the suspicious thoughts that will give away the traitor's identity. But it's not that easy, as you can't just point your finger: you need friends on your side so they'll vote your way. So you need to build up your relationships by fighting alongside them, so they'll follow your lead. Once you reach the last boss fight, the traitors will reveal themselves (if there are any left) before the climactic encounters.

This is pretty cool idea, reminiscent of the *Danganronpa* games, in that there are a bunch of mildly eccentric characters set up in a hostile environment, but a little more interesting, since the narrative isn't set in stone. However, the rest of the game could use some work. The battles are played out in gridless SRPG fashion, allowing characters to move around the field, but these sections are largely devoid of any actual strategy, since the stages are so dull. Friendly characters will join your attacks, so it's easy to overwhelm the foes. The setup is great, but the overall plot just never reaches its potential.

Action RPGs

When computer RPGs first came about, they could be divided into "turn-based", in which your heroes attacked following your selection of commands from a menu, or "action-based", in which you directly controlled your character and could walk up to your foes to do combat. Of course, in the old days, this generally just amounted to pushing your hero up against an enemy and letting math dictate how much damage was done, as seen in games like *Dragon Slayer* and *Xanadu.* As the games became more advanced, they began to provide more control over the characters, so defeating an enemy required some level of skill, beyond just your stats. One of the earliest, or at least most popular, of this style was the *Hydlide* series, which was still fairly basic; there were also the *Ys* games, which were slightly more advanced, but still mostly revolved around slamming characters into one another.

Both of these series were discussed earlier, in the "Early PC JRPGs" section, so for this action subsection, we're starting off with *The Legend of Zelda* for the original NES. There's still a lot of debate as to whether *Zelda* constitutes an RPG, and we'll certainly get to that, but there's no doubt that it's the ancestor of many, many action RPGs that appeared on 8- and 16-bit console platforms. Some of these are pretty blatant *Zelda* clones, but others add traditional RPG elements, like experience points and larger amounts of equipment, so that they'd definitely qualify. Most of these games use an overhead perspective, again like *Zelda,* but some use a side-scrolling perspective. Sometimes the "Metroidvania" moniker is fitting, too, so we'll be looking at some of the *Castlevania* and *Wonder Boy* titles. Some of the more popular 16-bit games came from Quintet, itself a company created by former Falcom members.

The balance between "action" and "RPG" is often a difficult one. One of the main draws of RPGs is that, theoretically, anyone can play them, and any challenges can be overcome either by growing stronger or by figuring out a new strategy. On the other hand, action games are primarily about reflexes, pattern recognition, and other skills that more typically apply to arcade games. Assorted games try to blend these elements with varying levels of success. *Secret of Man*a, for example, gives each attack a cool-down, so you need to wait a few seconds between attacks, giving it sort of a turn-based feeling even though everything else works in real-time. The aforementioned *Ys* series basically has experience gates, where you need to be at a certain level or have specific equipment, or else you'll be slaughtered by the enemies, regardless of your action gaming skills.

This style of 2D RPG started to disappear in the 32-bit era, not only as games transitioned to 3D, but as games from other genres began to weave RPG elements into themselves, like currency or growth systems. Most of the results can't really be called RPGs, although as usual, there's a fine line. We've included *Kingdom Hearts,* which was basically descended from the *Mana* series, which definitely qualifies it, but we're also including some borderline cases, like the *Nier* duology, as well as the expansive *Yakuza* series, which incorporates many JRPG elements. There's also a look at the *SoulsBorne* games – that is, the series of games by FromSoftware that includes *Demon's Souls, Dark Souls,* and *Bloodborne,* which also inspired a whole bunch of other similar games; we also look at their predecessors, like *King's Field.* We've also included some '80s and '90s arcade games that borrowed various RPG mechanics or aesthetics.

FromSoftware's *SoulsBorne* series, including *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne,* remains one of the most internationally recognised action RPGs on the market today.

The Legend of Zelda (series)

Developer: Nintendo | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): NES, SNES, GB, N64, GC, GBA, WII, NSW and more

For years, the video game community has posed the question: "Is the *Zelda* series a JRPG?" The consensus is that it isn't, falling under a more nebulous "action-adventure" designation, but if you read contemporaneous Japanese role-playing game catalogues, it's there, along with *Ultima*, *Mugen no Shinzou*, and *Dragon Slayer*. So in actuality, it appears that the definition of an RPG has shifted over the years to the point where *Zelda* no longer qualifies.

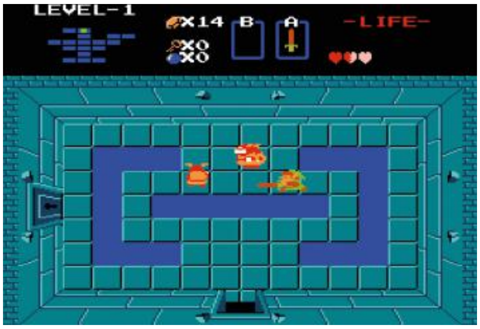
The original *The Legend of Zelda* was released for the Famicom Disk System in 1986. At the time, there was no way to save progress onto a cartridge, requiring the use of tedious passwords. But disks could save your game, which was the big selling point of the system. (Of course, for the international release the next year, technology had caught up: battery-backed RAM allowed saves on cartridges, so the point became moot.)

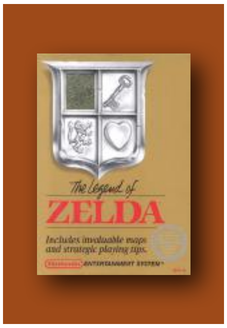
In the game, you control elf-like hero Link, as he explores the world of Hyrule to save the Princess Zelda from the evil Ganon. The overworld is divided into a 16 × 8 grid, and consists of nine dungeons to conquer. These dungeons often have simple puzzles that block off a room, unless you accomplish a specific task (kill all of the enemies, push a block, etc.) Within these dungeons are extra pieces of equipment that will help you navigate other parts of the land, like a raft to cross certain parts of the water, or a whistle to warp around the map.

In computer RPGs like *Dragon Slayer* or *Hydlide*, you would bump into an enemy to fight them, with damage determined by both characters' stats, alongside some randomness. In *Zelda*, there's an actual button used to swing Link's sword. There isn't really a magic system, but if Link is at full health, he'll shoot a sword projectile across the screen, and there are arrows and bombs that act as secondary attacks. It is a little clumsy, owing to the four-way directional movement, but it's a huge improvement over other games of the time. As a result, combat is more focused on your skill than statistics. And without the need for statistics, these are largely (though not completely) dropped. Enemies drop currency called Rupees, which can be used to purchase items. There are no towns, but hermits found in caves and dungeons will either sell you things or give (poorly translated) hints.

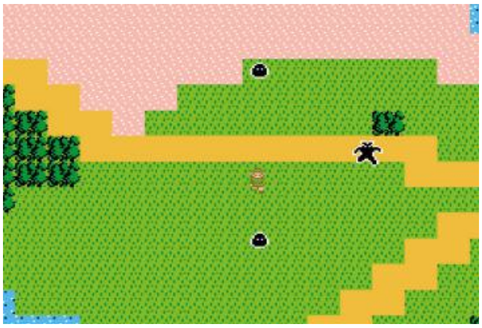
Most of the subsequent *Zelda* games were direct evolutions of this concept. *Link's Awakening* for the Game Boy and *Link to the Past* for the SNES included more elaborate storytelling, as well as towns with more comprehensible NPCs, and the structure became more linear, requiring that you explored dungeons in a specific order, but most of the series hewed closely to this template.

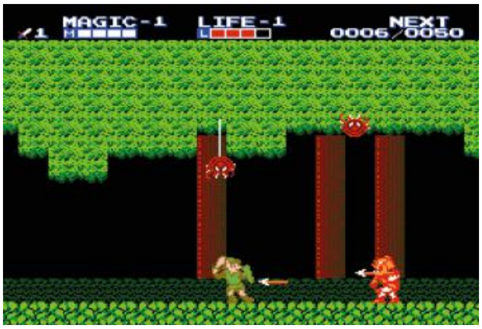
Over the years, "role-playing" elements began to mean that you had a character who could be upgraded over the course of the game. *The Legend of Zelda* still has all of these elements, but they're largely abstracted – there's no numerical HP, but health is represented visually by hearts.




The Legend of
ZELDA
Includes invaluable maps and strategic playing tips.
Nintendo ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM

The box for the original NES *The Legend of Zelda* is iconic, including the opening that shows the golden cartridge held within.





THE LEGEND OF ZELDA 2
リンクの冒険

***Zelda II* was a huge shift in gameplay, but on its own merits, is a fantastic, albeit difficult, game. The Japanese artwork is less distinguished than its overseas counterpart, but more indicative of the main character, Link.**

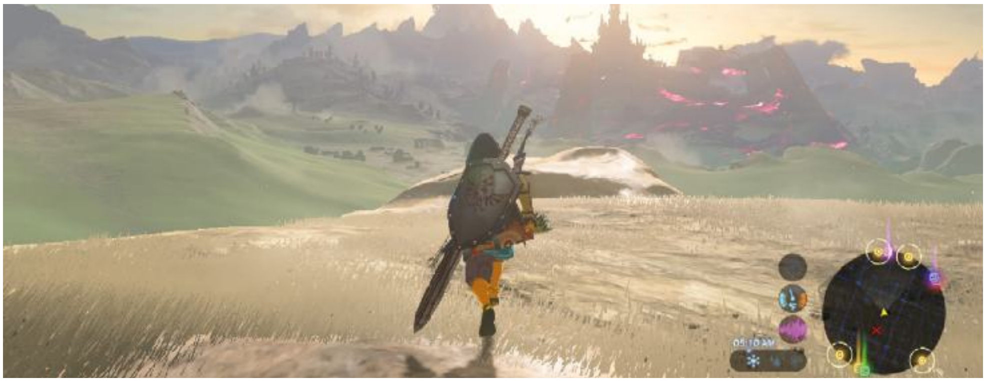
There are weapons, shields, and defence enhancements, but they are sparse. There is no experience-based levelling system, so Link grows more powerful by finding equipment via exploration or puzzle solving rather than through combat. Games throughout the '90s, including those inspired by *Zelda*, added a much larger variety of combat equipment, or more elaborate magic systems, or experience systems, while the *Zelda* games, for the most part, didn't. And while *Zelda* stories started to become more complex, with *Ocarina of Time* for the Nintendo 64, they still weren't quite as involved as games like *Final Fantasy*, or even *Dragon Quest*. So again, the popular understanding of what "RPG" meant evolved, but *Zelda* didn't evolve with it. And such RPG elements as did exist were so simplified as to no longer qualify.

The exception here is *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link* for the NES, a massive departure from the original game. It was obviously influenced by *Dragon Quest*, including a similar-looking overworld, which is combat-free, used solely for travel. Whenever you enter towns, caves, or castles, or encounter a foe on the overworld map, the game switches to a side-scrolling perspective for the action. Unlike the original game, *Zelda II* has towns, as well as an experience system, so you can upgrade your health, magic, or attack power. Armour and sword upgrades are not present, but there is a relatively wide assortment of magic spells. The dungeons, now represented as castles, are gigantic mazes focused on combat and exploration – unlike the original, there is no in-game map – rather than puzzle-solving. All of these are still considered role-playing elements, even in the modern definition. Since it is so different, it's not popular with series fans, but as an 8-bit action RPG, it's excellent. Combat is challenging but rewarding, and while it is difficult, it's not really much harder than many other games of the era, and it's less obscure than games like *Castlevania II* or *Legacy of the Wizard*.

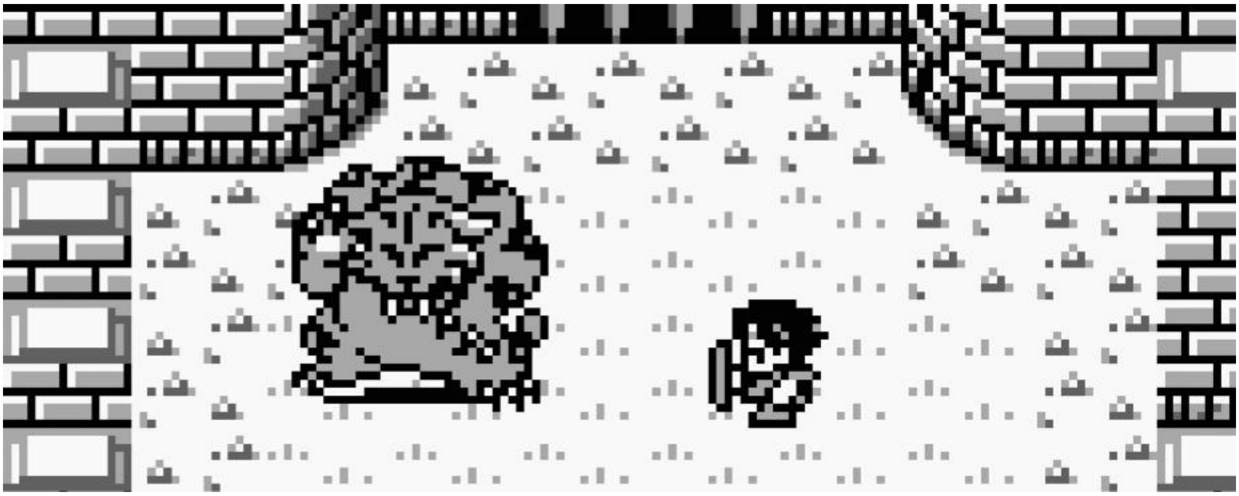
After the Nintendo 64 era, most *Zelda* games patterned themselves after *A Link to the Past* or *Ocarina of Time*. However, with the 2017 release *Breath of the Wild*, Nintendo finally decided to drastically rework the formula, taking more inspiration from open-world games like *The Elder Scrolls*. The template changes so that Link can approach the game's main tasks in almost any order. Large dungeons were replaced with smaller shrines, which consisted of optional challenges, allowing you to increase either your health or your stamina (your running and climbing abilities). The equipment system is far more complex, as almost every weapon or piece of armour will break after use, requiring constant recycling of things dropped by enemies. There's also an elaborate crafting system, allowing you to create items that will temporarily boost your abilities or allow you to survive in harsh weather. Though the story is still sparse, compared to more cinematic games, and there still aren't numerical stats, there's no doubt that this added complexity puts the game more firmly into the "role-playing" category.

But, ultimately, it comes down to marketing. Nintendo itself is inconsistent about what to call the game, but it seems that from their perspective, RPGs are for RPG fans, but *Zelda* games are for everyone.

While consistently successful, the *Zelda* formula was getting a bit long in the tooth as the years went on, so the reinvention with the Wii U/Switch release *Breath of the Wild* was met with widespread applause.



THE LEGEND OF
ZELDA
BREATH OF THE WILD



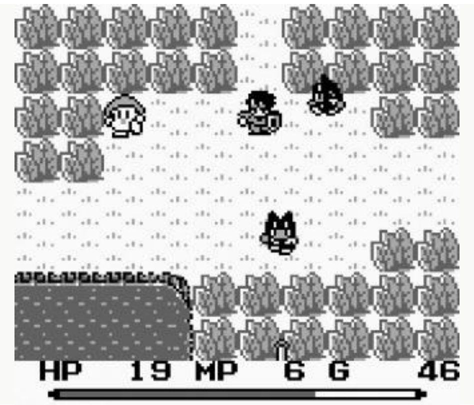
Final Fantasy Adventure

Developer: Square | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): GB, GBA, MOB, PSV

Directed by Koichi Ishii, *Final Fantasy Adventure* was the first of many spinoffs from Square's RPG series. Known as *Seiken Densetsu: Final Fantasy Gaiden* ("Holy Sword Legend") in Japan and *Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest* in Europe (no relationship to the SNES game of the same name), it re-imagines the series to create an action RPG similar to the original *Legend of Zelda*. The hero must fight against the evil Dark Lord, who seeks to control the energy of the Mana Tree. The hero meets a girl, who has a mysterious pendant that proves her to be descended from the guardians of the Mana Tree, and is constantly hunted by the Dark Lord's forces.

The visual style is very much like the 8-bit *Final Fantasy* games, though it introduces many elements expanded in later *Seiken Densetsu* games. While the player directly controls the hero, computer-controlled companions (including the heroine) are usually present too, and provide him with aid. (They are also, thankfully, invincible.) The hero can wield various weapons, like swords, axes, spears, and sickles, and he can choose to increase certain stats when levelling up. There's also a power bar that increases automatically, allowing you to execute stronger attacks when fully charged. Enemies like the cutesy Rabites and Mushbooms make their first appearances, as do the strangely joyful dancing shopkeepers. The soundtrack, provided by Kenji Ito, is also one of the best on the Game Boy, with particularly striking main and overworld themes. It may be a little simple, especially compared to the later *Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*, but for an 8-bit action RPG it's remarkably solid.

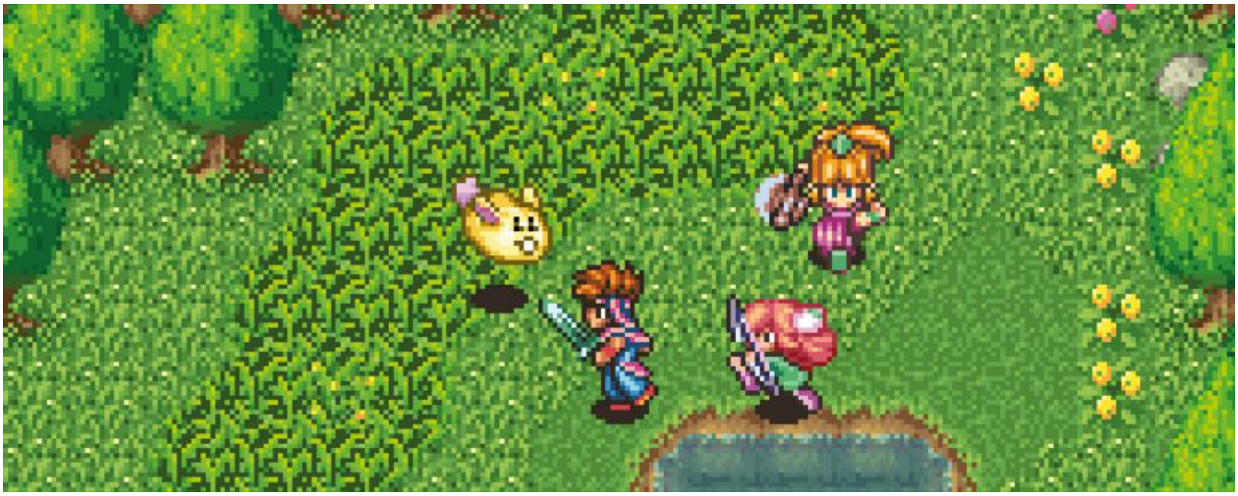
There are no less than three remakes of this game. The first is *Sword of Mana* for the Game Boy Advance, which is a complete overhaul featuring character designs in the vein of the PS1 *Legend of Mana*, mechanics from the later SNES games, and completely redesigned maps. The basic story is similar, but has been expanded; the additional dialogue makes the game richer, but also drags the pacing down significantly. It also suffers from some of the same issues as the later *Mana* games, like clumsy combat. The companions are playable now, but when they're CPU-controlled, their AI is terrible, plus they are vulnerable to damage now. There's also a class system for developing your characters. It's not a bad remake but while the additions make things prettier, they don't really make them better.



GAME BOY
FINAL FANTASY
ADVENTURE

The origin of the *Mana* series is actually this *Final Fantasy* action spinoff, initially released for the Game Boy.

The other two remakes are more faithful – a Japan-only mobile release, which uses colourful sprite-based visuals, and a smartphone/Vita release with 3D visuals, which was released internationally as *Adventures of Mana*. These keep the story, gameplay and even map designs of the GB original, but with upgraded graphics. The 3D remake is obviously a little cheap-looking, but the spectacular arrangements in the soundtrack almost make up for that.



Secret of Mana

Developer: Square | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SNES, PS4, PSV

The sequel to *Final Fantasy Adventure*, *Secret of Mana* begins when a boy named Randi discovers a innocuous-looking sword stuck in a rock; little does he know that it is the legendary Mana Sword, which saved the world in centuries past. His village believes this to be a bad omen, and they exile him. During his adventures, he learns of the sorcerer Thanatos, who seeks to resurrect the Mana Fortress of the previous calamity and use its power to take over the world. He wields the Sword that can fight against him, though it's in rough shape, so he needs to visit the eight temples across the land to recharge it.

Much has changed with the shift from the Game Boy to the SNES, though some elements can be seen in evolved form. There are now a total of eight weapons you can wield, each of which grows in skill level as you use it, plus there are several elemental spirits that act as magic spells. Randy meets two companions, a girl named Primm and a sprite named Popoi, and they take a much more active role in combat than did earlier game companions. In single player mode, they are directed by AI (which can be fine-tuned), but they can also be controlled by other players. There's still a power bar, which takes about two or three seconds to recharge; however, it needs to be at 100% when use a weapon, or else you will do almost no damage. You can also hold down the button longer, for even more powerful attacks.

It also develops a more distinct identity, separating it from the *Final Fantasy* games. This is a gorgeous game, filled with colourful characters, each given personality through unique animations. And the soundtrack by Hiroki Kikuta is outstanding throughout. New elements introduced into the *Mana* series include a cat merchant named Neko, who will also helpfully save your game. And rather humourously, early on, rapid transit in the overworld involves getting shot through the air from a cannon, though later you can summon a dragon named Flammie, and fly, instead.

641/699
559/559
554/554

Alas, the combat is the biggest point of contention. The need to charge up for every single swing gives the action a very stop-and-go feeling, not to mention the iffy hit detection. The AI characters are often dumb, getting stuck in obstacles or needing constant healing. Magic attacks are also unavoidable, so your only recourse when fighting bosses is just to bring lots of restoratives. It's really unrefined compared to later SNES RPGs, though the fact that it's one of the few RPGs that supports multiplayer action led many to forgive its faults.

A 2017 remake plays faithfully, for better or worse. It redoes everything in 3D – the art style translated well but it can't help but feel a little low-budget. It expands the dialogue and adds voices, which are alright; it also adds an arranged soundtrack, which is incredibly inconsistent, though the original music is available. It's not bad, but since the SNES version is readily available, it feels redundant.

SECRET of MANA
SUPER NINTENDO

The combat is pretty clumsy, but the gorgeous (and often comical) world, fantastic music, and multiplayer action turn this follow-up into a classic.

Trials of Mana

Developer: Square | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC, NSW, PS4, WIN

The basic story of *Trials of Mana* (known in Japan as *Seiken Densetsu 3* and sometimes referred to by the fan-given nickname "Secret of Mana 2") is pretty typical RPG stuff – you control a party of adventurers that journeys through the world, visiting magical mana stones to unleash the elemental spirits within, finding the legendary Mana Sword, and using it to protect the all-powerful Mana Tree from evil. But it's the way that it's told that makes it unique. Square was big on anthology stories at the time, as noted in the *Romancing SaGa* games as well as *Live-A-Live*, which features multiple playable characters. Here, you pick a main character from the six offered, and then choose two companions. The prologue focuses on the chosen protagonist, who meets up with the others not too far into the adventure. While much of the game is similar regardless of your chosen hero, it does also branch off to focus on various subplots, meaning you need to play it through at least three times to really get the most out of the story. Angela is a magic-wielding princess, while Duran is an orphaned mercenary; Hawkeye is a thief, while Riesz is a spear-wielding Amazon; Kevin is basically a werewolf prince, while Charlotte is a young half-elf. After a point, the hunt for the spirits can also be done in almost any order, so there's a lot of flexibility in how to approach it.

Combat has been refined so that your characters automatically run around when exploring, but stop to draw their weapons when encountering enemies. When drawn, they move a little slower, but the power meter from *Secret of Mana* has gone. It still feels a little choppy, but the ally AI is much better, at least. Upon levelling up, you can choose to improve specific stats, as well as evolve characters into various classes. There's also a day-night cycle, plus each day of the week is associated with one of the elemental spirits, strengthening that class of magic.

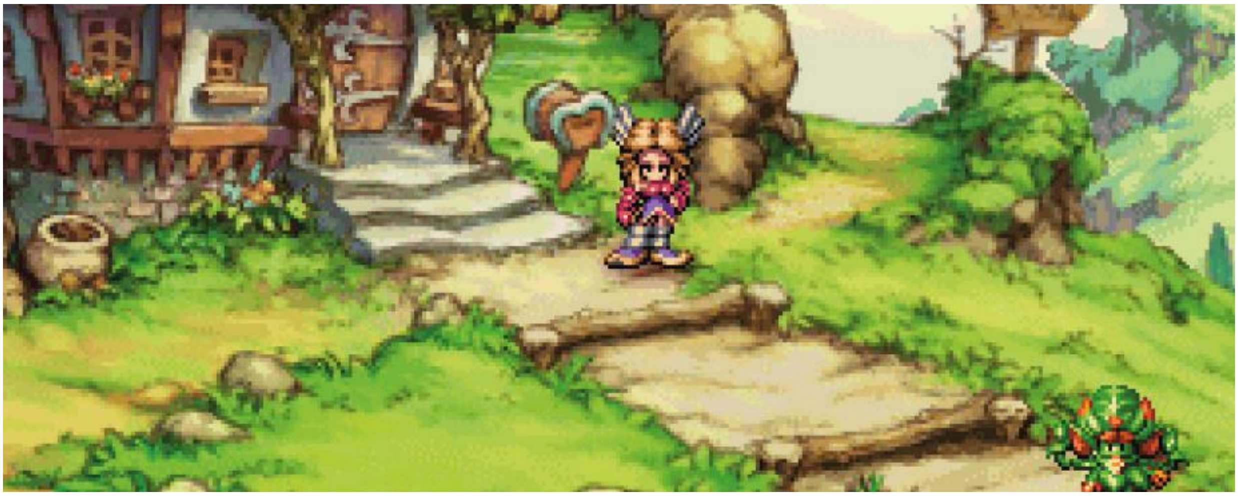
1. 93/101
LV:3 MP:10
R. 116/123
LV:5 MP:9

聖剣伝説3
SQUARESOFT

Aesthetically, everything about this game – released in the later SNES period – shows Square was on top form. The sprite visuals are gorgeous – similar in style to *Secret of Mana*'s but more detailed, and both the landscapes and boss designs are incredible. Hiroki Kikuta composed another masterful score, that's more complex but just as listenable. Fixing pretty much every issue with its predecessor, plus offering a huge, replayable adventure, resulted in one of the best action RPGs on the Super Famicom.

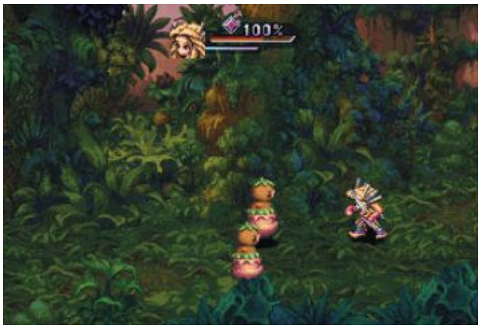
Alas, the game was not initially released in English. It finally received an official localisation in 2019 as part of the *Collection of Mana* for the Switch, plus a full remake in 2020. This was a much more drastic overhaul than was given to the 3D versions of either previous *Mana* game. The action is much more solid, playing similarly to that in the modern *Ys* games, and the addition of maps and waypoints helps when exploring the otherwise somewhat confusing areas. The biggest downsides are the lack of multiplayer support, and the surprisingly poor voice acting.

Of all of Square's 16-bit titles, this and *Final Fantasy V* were the ones most demanded by English speaking fans, relying on a fan translation for over 20 years until a localisation finally happened in 2019.



Legend of Mana

Developer: Square | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1



PlayStation
Legend of Mana
SQUARESOFT

The fourth *Mana* game was a spinoff, as it was a joint venture, bringing the *SaGa* team in to work on the *Mana* franchise. As a result, it's a unique title that has many qualities typical of *SaGa* series producer Akitoshi Kawazu. The player can choose between male and female characters, and then which type of weapon they use, though they are a complete blank slate when it comes to personality.

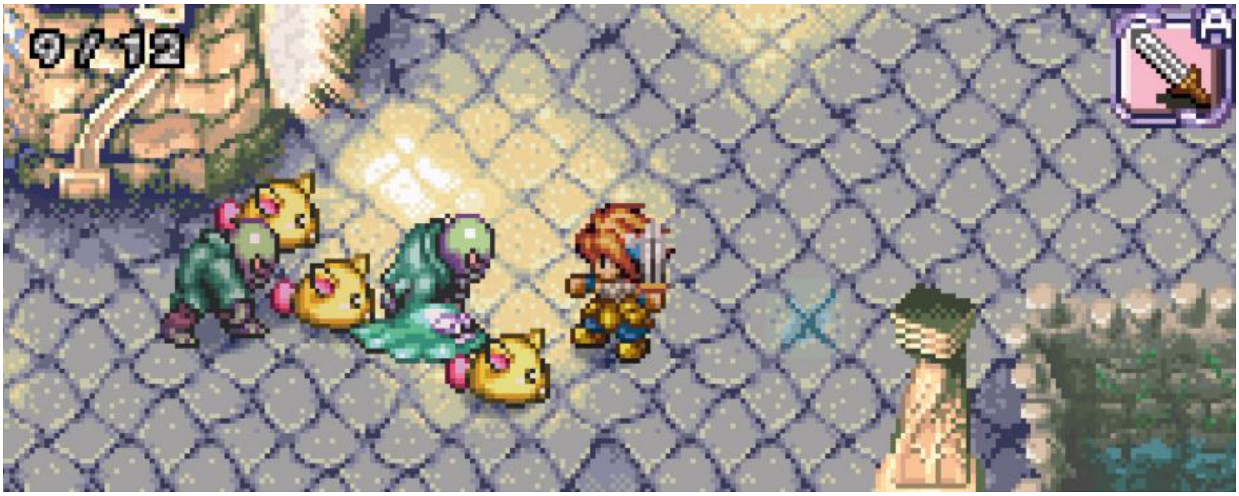
Your initial goal is vague: restoration of the Mana Tree. The game uses a unique Land Make system, in which you collect artefacts and place them on the map, which then turns them into locations – towns and dungeons – that you can visit. Where you place them on the map can have subtle effects, like changing the strength of the monsters within. As you explore these areas, you'll uncover various quests (68 in total, with three main plot threads), which usually involve either exploring or beating up some enemies somewhere. Many of them are also character-focused and feature a partner, who will join you in combat. There's quite a lot of stuff you can do in your home too: you can forge weapons, raise pets or create golems (who can join in during combat), and make musical instruments for magical use.

Battles are a little slower than in *Trials of Mana*, and they feel a little strange, since you can only attack horizontally. You cannot run from encounters either, but you are completely healed after each battle, and can even regenerate health by standing still mid-fight. Various magic and special moves can be mapped to the shoulder buttons, too. Altogether, it feels a little clumsy, though that is typical of many *Mana* titles. Multiplayer mode is unusual in that the second player must either control the selected partner (if available) or import their own character from a memory card, so there's no easy way for a buddy to jump in or out.

Visually, everything is pure delight. The sprites are similar to *Trials of Mana*'s but more detailed, while each background is individually hand-painted. At a time when Square was focused on either polygon-based 3D or computer-rendered backgrounds, it stands out as one of the best-looking RPGs of its era. It's also populated with an eccentric cast of characters, including many anthropomorphic ones, like the shameless bunny merchant Niccolo and the temperamental detective Boyd, as well as oddball groups like the naive Dudbears and the goofy Pirate Penguins. Everything from the lushly illustrated art to the idiosyncratic storytelling gives it a quaint, storybook charm. The music from Yoko Shimomura is always on point, ranging from the folksy Swedish-language vocal song, through the peaceful town themes, to the rocking boss tracks.

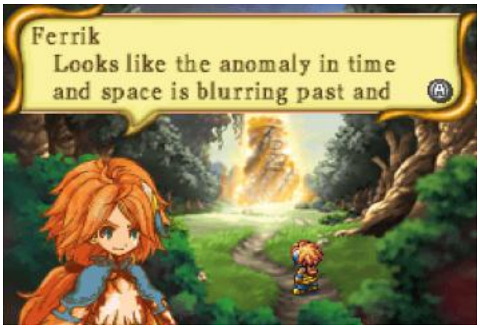
Players looking for a story-based experience like the previous *Mana* games will probably be disappointed, as the narrative is very disjointed and directionless, and it has more subsystems than it really needs. But those who can adjust to its foibles will likely become enamoured with *Legend of Mana*'s strange and wonderful world.

The reason this is considered a spinoff is that it's basically *Mana* + *SaGa*, a unique combination that the Western audience couldn't quite parse at the time.



Children of Mana

Developer: Square/Nex Entertainment | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): DS


Ferrik
Looks like the anomaly in time
and space is blurring past and

Children of Mana
Nintendo DS

Children of Mana is another spinoff, focused entirely on dungeon crawling, and developed by Nex Entertainment (*Crusader of Centy, Shining Soul*). You control a group of four orphans, who must solve the mystery of what happened to their parents.

It's a fairly constrictive game – there's no overworld, just a single town (with only a few screens) and a map screen that lets you choose your destination. Once you've embarked on a stage, you need to complete a certain number of levels before you reach the boss and complete the level. Each stage can also be revisited by tackling any one of numerous sub-quests, usually with a slightly different layout (there are no randomly-generated stages). Simply finding the exit to a stage isn't nearly enough – you need to find the gem that unlocks the portal to the next level. Sometimes they're easy to find. Most of the time it involves whaling on all of the bad guys in the area until it pops up. Since there's very little in the way of actual exploration, the vast majority of *Children of Mana* is focused on item gathering and level gaining.

Thankfully, fighting bad guys is pretty fun. You can equip two weapons at once (out of four total, including swords, flails, bows, and hammers), with each having two kinds of attacks. Smashing an enemy into a wall will cause him to bounce around and slam into other enemies ... or your own character, if you're not careful, although at least that doesn't drain any HP.

There are four different characters to play as, and you simply pick one in the beginning and play as them through the entire game. The characters' storylines vary only slightly, but they each have different combat and magic abilities. Unfortunately, the magic skills are pretty lame, considering you can only take one Spirit (read as: set of spells) into a dungeon. You need to head back to town if you want to change it, which drastically reduces its usefulness. Want to be able to use healing magic AND fire magic? Too bad, you're out of luck.

There are several elements that will seem familiar to *Mana* fans. You ride a dragon named Flammie, there are merchants that looks like cats, and there's a guy with a huge turban. You still wield multiple weapons, you still engulf candy to gain HP, and several familiar bad guys, such as Rabites, make their appearance. There's the ever-important and permanently threatened Mana Tree, and lots of summonable spirits to help you out. You can even play local multiplayer with up to three other people, although there's a suspicious lack of AI controlled partners.

While the graphics are repetitive, as is natural to this kind of game, they're pretty well done, especially the gorgeously painted town scenes. But the real standout is the soundtrack, which maintains the same musical excellence Square has been known for since the 16-bit era. With a fairly thin storyline and no world-spanning adventure, it's not a patch on the main games, but as a simple hack-and-slasher, it's fun enough.

The focus of this spinoff is on dungeon crawling, so it may be a bit of a disappointment for fans, but at least the combat is fun.

Dawn of Mana

Developer: Square | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PS2

Dawn of Mana focuses on two main characters – Ritzia, a girl who takes care of the Mana Tree, and Keldric, her guardian knight, who the player controls. The two must protect the Tree from the invasion of the nefarious King Stroud. The story is pretty typical, though it does have some minor references to other *Mana* games.

Dawn of Mana was part of a bigger project called *World of Mana*, which included the DS action RPG *Children of Mana*, the real-time strategy game (and prequel to *Trials of Mana*), *Heroes of Mana*, and an online Japan-only RPG, *Friends of Mana*. This game was the primary release for the series, being the only title to come out on a console, plus in Japan it was given the name *Seiken Densetsu 4*, officially making it part of the mainline series.

However, it's really unclear why Square decided to grant it that title – probably just for marketing reasons – because outside of some story references, it has little in common with its predecessors. In fact, there are so many changes here that it can only barely be called an RPG. There's no overworld or any real exploration elements, and progress is entirely stage-based. Though Keldric can obtain items to increase his stats, they only affect the given stage and reset when you enter a new one. While you can wield three main weapons – the sword, a slingshot, and a whip – plus there's a fairy that can cast magic, there's nothing in the way of equipment either. Ritzia accompanies Keldric at times, but she doesn't really fight, and there's no multiplayer support at all. All of the cool player characters, class upgrades, and branching paths of the previous game are just missing, and it's a tremendous disappointment.

The game is the first in the series to be fully 3D, though the combat system is clumsy in some unique ways. The big gimmick is the MONO ("thing" in Japanese) system, which refers to the Havok-based physics engine. There are many items – boulders and such, mostly – that you can knock around and into enemies, which will cause them to panic. Killing them while they're panicked is easier, plus they'll give out extra stat-enhancing items. You've heavily incentivised to take advantage of this, but ultimately, it's just not much fun trying to push stuff around – in fact, much of the game feels like a proof-of-concept demo that somehow skipped the intervening stages and became a completed product. Additionally, the combat suffers from other issues, ranging from a dodgy camera to slow character movement.

The visuals are pleasant enough, but the environments are repetitive, and there's not much beyond seemingly large expanses filled with enemies. The soundtrack is supplied by an assortment of composers, including Kenji Ito, who did the music for the first game, as well as Tsuyoshi Sekito (*Brave Fencer Musashi*) and Ryuichi Sakamoto (Yellow Magic Orchestra) for the main theme. It's outstanding, so it's unfortunate that it wasn't attached to a better game.

PlayStation 2
Dawn of Mana
T
SQUARE ENIX

The previous *Mana* spinoffs felt off but were still pretty fun; this game may be known as *Seiken Densetsu 4* in Japan, but its quality doesn't match the level seen in the previous games.

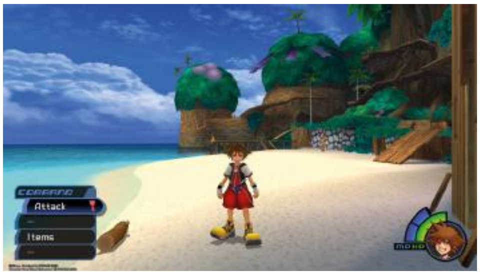
Kingdom Hearts (series)

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): PS2, PS3, PS4, XB1, PSP, DS, 3DS

What began as a literal elevator pitch from a Square executive to a Disney employee has since turned into one of the most popular role-playing titles the company ever produced: *Kingdom Hearts*. The long-running saga of the Keyblade wielder Sora and his travels throughout the various lands of Disney lore to vanquish evil has captured the hearts of generations of players since the inaugural title debuted in 2002.

The game concept was conceived by Shinji Hashimoto (who had just finished producing *Final Fantasy VIII* and *IX*) and Hironobu Sakaguchi (the creator of *Final Fantasy*), who had the idea of featuring Disney characters in a game. Not long thereafter, Hashimoto ran into with a Disney executive in the elevator – Square and Disney both had offices in the same building. After gaining Disney's approval for such a project, Square began work in earnest on the inaugural title, development beginning in February 2000 with Tetsuya Nomura (who at that point was best known for his character design work on *Final Fantasy VII*) heading the project. The game's music was handled by Yoko Shimomura, and – in spite of her prolific career, including *Street Fighter II, Super Mario RPG, Parasite Eve,* and numerous others – *Kingdom Hearts* has become her signature franchise.

The key concept in *Kingdom Hearts* is that all of the Disney films and franchises inhabit their own worlds, which you then travel between. In terms of gameplay, most of the titles are action RPGs, with a hack-and-slash style of combat at the forefront. Typically the player controls the main protagonist, who's joined by other characters governed by the computer. While the hero is controlled with the analogue stick, you can use the control pad to cycle through an on-screen menu, so you can use magic or items without having to pause the game. Famous Disney characters also appear as Summons, like Simba, from *The Lion King* and the Genie from *Aladdin*, who can be called into combat when certain conditions are met. The numbered entries in the series also feature shoot-'em-up style gameplay during the "Gummi Ship" segments, when Sora and company are moving between worlds.



PlayStation 2
Kingdom Hearts

The storyline for the first game is fairly straightforward, as you just hop from world to world, meeting up with familiar heroes and foiling familiar villains. These scenarios take place in the middle of the film's stories (e.g. in the case of *The Little Mermaid*, you visit Ariel before she makes her deal with Ursula), which gives everything a sort of fan-fiction feel. However, in subsequent entries, the overarching story becomes much more complicated. It doesn't that help that, in the nearly 15-year gap between the second and third games, there were numerous spinoff games with seemingly nonsensical titles, all of which were required in order to understand just what the heck was going on. The result is that *Kingdom Hearts* reputedly has the most inscrutable plot of any Japanese RPG – and given how wild these games can be, that's really saying something.

The original concept of *Kingdom Hearts* was so straightforward – Disney characters mashed into a Square RPG – until the storytelling got wildly overcomplicated.

LOCK ON!
COMMAND
Attack
Items

Make sure you're prepared for the journey ahead of you.

The screenshots pictured here are from *Kingdom Hearts 1.5* for the PlayStation 4, which has revamped HD visuals, though it's still a PS2 game at heart, with all of the technical and design constraints that entails.

The first *Kingdom Hearts* title was released in 2002 for the PlayStation 2. The story follows Sora, a young boy who lives on the Destiny Islands with his friends Kairi and Riku. The trio longs to leave the islands and explore new worlds together, but before they get the chance, the islands are attacked by creatures known as the Heartless. Kairi and Riku both disappear in the attack, and Sora wakes up in a place called Traverse Town. There, he meets Donald and Goofy, who have been sent by King Mickey to find the Key to fighting the oncoming evil. As Sora is the person chosen to wield the powerful weapon known as the Keyblade, Donald and Goofy follow him as he searches for Kairi and Riku, with the Disney duo hoping to track down Mickey himself. Also playing an important role is Yen Sid, the long-bearded wizard who made his debut in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.

While the biggest emphasis is placed on Disney characters, there are also assorted *Final Fantasy* cast members who pop in and help the plot move along. Tidus, Selphie, and Wakka appear as kids on Destiny Islands, while Aeris, Yuffie, and Squall (now older and going by the name Leon) appear in Traverse Town. Cid from *Final Fantasy VII* also appears as a shopkeeper, and will help tune up your Gummi Ship. While nice fan service, their appearances often feel arbitrary, as if their dialogue could've been given to any other character and it wouldn't have made a difference. It is the first time you hear voiced dialogue for many of these characters though. Other *Final Fantasy* conventions are used, particularly spell and item names. The currency, however, is Munny, spelled like "hunny" from Winnie the Pooh.

Travelling through the worlds of *Alice in Wonderland, Tarzan, Aladdin, Hercules, The Nightmare Before Christmas,* and more, Sora and pals eventually find their way into Hollow Bastion, where Maleficent resides. There, Sora finds both Kairi and Riku – Kairi in a comatose state, and Riku having pledged himself to serve Maleficent. Sora is able to defeat Riku and Maleficent and restore Kairi's heart, only to learn that a powerful figure known as Ansem has been pulling the strings all along.

Despite the odd premise of blending *Final Fantasy* with Disney properties, the initial *Kingdom Hearts* was a massive success. Square's visual artists have always been some of the best in the business, and it's one fantastic-looking game in both its anime-styled original characters and the animation of the Disney characters. It actually does successfully weave together the more serious elements of Square's big RPG franchise with Disney's trademark whimsy. The voice acting is also excellent, as most of the actors from the films return to reprise their roles (with a few substitutes, like Dan Castellaneta filling in for Robin Williams as the Genie). Probably the most unusual one is NSYNC member Lance Bass as the voice of Sephiroth, who appears as one of the super-powerful bosses in the Coliseum. Mega J-Pop star Hikaru Utada was also tapped to provide the vocal theme songs, including both English and Japanese versions.

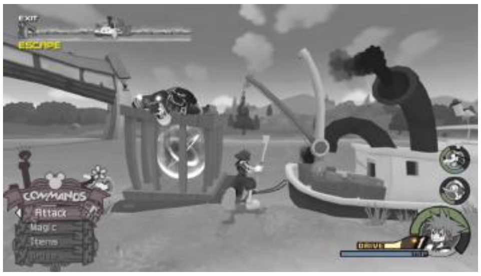
The biggest sticking point, though, is the battle system, with an often-wonky camera and a frustrating difficulty curve that often spikes severely during boss battles. The environment design is also pretty bad. Many areas are confusing to navigate, and directions are often vague, requiring that you run around the same locations until you figure out what trigger you're supposed to hit. The lack of an in-game map makes things even more difficult.

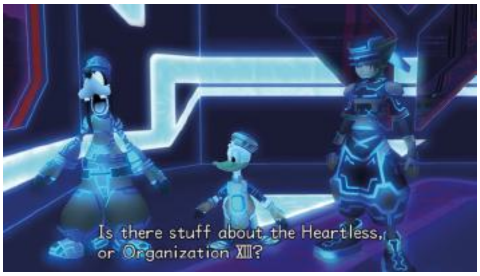
The game was re-released in Japan in December 2002 as the *Final Mix* edition, which included some new, optional bosses that had been added in for the first international edition, as well as a fight against the "Unknown Man," which foreshadowed the events of the planned sequel. The game would be remastered in HD as part of

I know the nesting grounds are secret, but I trust them.

COMMAND
Attack
Magic
Items
Summon

To the left, Sora and pals enter the worlds of *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid.* Above, they hang out with Yuffie, Squall, and Aerith from assorted *Final Fantasy* games.




Is there stuff about the Heartless, or Organization XIII?

Kingdom Hearts 1.5 HD Remix in 2013, which also marked the first international release of the *Final Mix* edition.

Kingdom Hearts II was released just a few years later, in 2005, on the PlayStation 2. While the first game focused on the power of the Heartless, this sequel introduces the concept of the Nobodies. When a strong-hearted person becomes a Heartless, they also leave behind a Nobody – the "empty shell," so to speak, after the presumed main part of their personality becomes a Heartless. *Kingdom Hearts II* features numerous Nobodies as part of the plot; the main group of antagonists, Organization XIII, consists entirely of them.

Picking up roughly a year after the events of *Kingdom Hearts*, the game begins with the player in control of a new character, Roxas. It's not initially clear who Roxas is, except that he has some kind of connection with Sora. When Roxas wakes up Sora in Twilight Town, he meets Mickey and Yen Sid, who task him with uncovering Organization XIII's plans.

Sora once again travels to different Disney-inspired worlds, some old, many new – including *Mulan, The Pirates of the Caribbean, Tron*, and even the classic *Steamboat Willie* short – where he must contend with the Organization, the Heartless, and Disney villains. The party also learns that the "Ansem" they fought at the end of the first game was an imposter, and was really named Xehanort; the Organization's leader, Xemnas, is Xehanort's Nobody, and plans on summoning Kingdom Hearts to capture its power.

Kingdom Hearts II features roughly the same gameplay style as the original, with some added elements. These included the Drive Gauge, which can be used to transform Sora into a special Drive Form that boosts certain combat abilities and allows him to wield two Keyblades at the same time. The Gummi Ship portions were also reworked in response to criticism from the first game, in an attempt to make them more enjoyable for the player. The adjustments made them more like a rail shooter than a shoot-'em-up, and once the route to a world is opened, it's not necessary to do the travel portion again. The combat and camera have also seen improvements, and there is now, thankfully, an on-screen minimap.

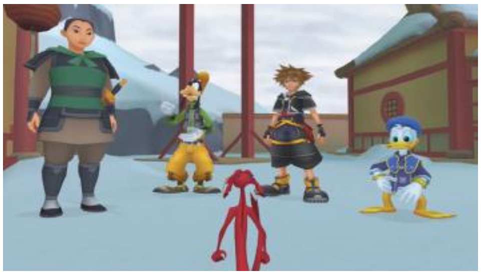
Kingdom Hearts II is a step up in most ways. The only real sour note is the prologue in which you play as Roxas: it drags on for hours, and there's no need for it to be so protracted. The escalating complexity of the plot is also a point of contention, especially considering the first game was a (mostly) self-contained goofy crossover game.

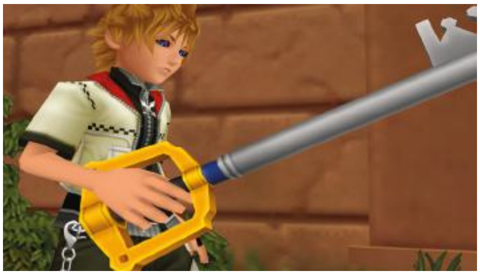
It, like the first game, received a *Final Mix* edition, exclusive to Japan, in March 2007, which included a new secret movie to unlock, additional battles, and more. It also included a PS2 remake of *Chain of Memories*. This edition wouldn't see release outside of Japan until the 2014 HD remaster, *Kingdom Hearts HD 2.5 Remix*.

The story continued and expanded through a handful of other titles across various platforms, which fleshed out the plot and set the stage for the final confrontation with Xehanort and Organization XIII. Many of these recycle music or locations from previous games, so they don't always feel new, even if the plot elements are essential to understanding the overall story.

Chain of Memories was the first of these, arriving in 2004 for the Game Boy Advance before later being ported to the PlayStation 2 as part of the *Kingdom Hearts II Final Mix*, and released separately as *RE: Chain of Memories* in North America. The novelty of the Game Boy Advance version is that it's the only 2D entry in the series, and it's interesting to see the characters rendered as sprites. From a storyline standpoint, this is an interpolation, taking place between the events of the first and second numbered titles, and served to introduce many elements that would

Kingdom Hearts II* ramps up the plot complexity, adding in a new protagonist named Roxas, and also sending Sora, Donald, and Goofy to unusual worlds based on *Tron* and *The Pirates of the Caribbean.





The games have a new challenger. Name's Cloud.

HP
LEVEL 3
LEVEL UP!

GAME BOY ADVANCE

But he's somewhere in this castle. I just know it.

HP
CardBreak

Chain of Memories **for the GBA has been remade for the PlayStation 2 (and ported elsewhere), though the original version has some decent sprite visuals.**

be later expanded upon in *Kingdom Hearts II* – in particular, Organization XIII.

In the game, Sora continues down the road on which we left him, Donald, and Goofy at the end of the first title, and eventually they stumble upon Castle Oblivion. There, they are shocked to learn that entering the castle has cost them their battle memories; they also meet a hooded figure who explains to them that if they travel deeper into the castle, they will continue to lose memories, but will gain new ones. Sora begins to remember a girl named Namine, an old friend of his, who, he is told, is being held prisoner in the castle. During his explorations he faces off against several members of the Organization, as well as a replica of Riku. The "Reverse/Rebirth" portion of the game stars Riku, who must fight his way up through the castle from its basement after being transported out of the realm of darkness. Riku must not only battle the Organization, but has to deal with the lingering darkness within him after the events of the first game.

Chain of Memories is well known for its polarising card-based battle system, with all attacks, items and magic being limited to what Sora happens to have in his deck at the time. Combining cards can create powerful combo attacks. Sora is allowed to customise his deck throughout his story, while Riku's deck is locked. The game was the least successful in terms of sales, though it received mixed to positive reviews.

The next entry, *Kingdom Hearts Coded*, debuted in 2008 and was released in episodic format for the NTT DoCoMo phone, exclusively in Japan until early 2010. It was later remade as *Kingdom Hearts Re:coded* for the Nintendo DS, releasing internationally in 2011. This game primarily focuses on puzzle-solving, with some action RPG elements built in. The story is focused on Jiminy Cricket's record of Sora's journeys; there's a line he does not recall writing, "Their hurting will be mended when you return to end it," bothers him, leading King Mickey to digitise the entire journal, at which point they discover that it's been corrupted. The journal's contents are then explored by virtual versions of Sora and Riku, who try to purify them. The game was originally intended to exist outside of the *Kingdom Hearts* chronology, but in the end its final chapters were reworked into the next few games. Nomura had designed the game with mobile platforms in mind, wanting to create a spinoff that played differently. The end result was generally referred to as "skip-worthy", with frustrating controls and a confusing story.

Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days was released on the Nintendo DS in 2009. Focusing on the story of Roxas and his time spent in the Organization before reuniting with Sora, it sees Roxas inducted into the Organization as its 13th member, and he forms fast friendships with Axel and Xion, two other Nobodies. As they continue to bond, Roxas and Xion both experience odd visions of Sora and begin to question the nature of their existence.

KH: 358/2 Days was developed by the studio h.a.n.d., with Square Enix overseeing development. Roxas was chosen as the game's main character, as Nomura believed that having someone other than Sora would be an interesting choice for the first DS title, and that his time with the Organization (as well as what specifically drove him to leave) was worth exploring further. The game received generally positive reviews, though the control scheme and story were both noted as being in

***Kingdom Hearts: Birth By Sleep* introduces even more characters into the ever-expanding roster of protagonists. Meanwhile, *358/2 Days* focuses more on the backstory of Roxas.**

need of improvement, and it became one of the better-selling Nintendo DS titles of 2009. The game was also dedicated to the memory of Wayne Allwine, the longtime English voice of Mickey Mouse – the game is his last to feature his performance as Mickey.

The prequel title *Birth By Sleep* debuted on the PlayStation Portable in 2010. The game introduces players to a new trio of characters, Terra, Aqua, and Ventus, all of whom study the Keyblade under Master Eraqus and are striving to protect the many connected worlds from creatures called Unversed, in addition to dealing with their personal strife. Terra, after failing to achieve the Mark of Mastery, falls under the influence of Xehanort. Aqua hopes to destroy the Unversed and counter the darkness in Terra's heart, but ends up discovering the deeds that Terra has committed. Ventus decides to chase after Terra, but he comes to blows with the mysterious Vanitas (who is also the source of the Unversed). The three stories come together in the end, with the trio reuniting in a place known as the Keyblade Graveyard.

Birth By Sleep's development began in 2005, originally for the PS2. The game was then shifted to the PSP in order to make use of the handheld's multiplayer functionality. Nomura has generally referred to *Birth By Sleep* as "Episode 0", as the game has the scope of a numbered title, and indeed a high-impact plot. The battle system has also been tuned up to feature combos and regenerating skills. Each of the characters plays differently too – Aqua, for example, can target-lock multiple enemies and shoot projectiles.

Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance was released for the Nintendo 3DS in 2012, and focuses on Sora and Riku as they both take the Mark of Mastery exam in preparation for the final showdown with Xehanort. It's believed that passing this exam will give them the power necessary to rescue various allies (such as Terra, Aqua and Ventus) in order to defeat the darkness. They are sent to "sleeping" worlds that have been destroyed by Heartless, and must each unlock different keyholes to restore the light to these worlds. Also making an appearance here is Neku Sakuraba, not the *Final Fantasy* character, but rather from the Square Enix game *The World Ends With You*, which Tetsuya Nomura oversaw as a creative director.

Control alternates between Sora and Riku, based on the Drop gauge, which depletes over time. There are various new attacks, including the Reality Shift, which lets you finish off enemies with touch-screen mini-games. Also included is the ability to recruit enemies, here called Dream Eaters, who can be customised and will fight alongside you in battle.

After these three console entries, the series continued with the Japan-exclusive *Kingdom Hearts χ* and its international version, *Unchained χ* (later rebranded as *Union X).* This expanded the universe of the franchise with a new prequel story, taking place before the Keyblade War, with cutesy 2D sprites in a web browser/mobile phone RPG.

Three collections of games have been released. The "main" games received ports, while the less important entries are represented only by cutscenes and little bits of text that help fill in the blanks. The first, *Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix*, contains remastered versions of *Kingdom Hearts Final Mix* and *Re:Chain of Memories*, plus high-definition cutscenes from *358/2 Days* in "theatre mode". *Kingdom Hearts HD 2.5 Remix* contains HD ports of *Kingdom Hearts II Final Mix*, and *Birth By Sleep Final Mix* with *Re:coded* included as cutscenes only. These were initially released for the PlayStation 3, and later ported to the PlayStation 4. The games themselves are largely untouched outside of the HD makeover, widescreen aspect ratio, and 60 FPS frame rate. *Kingdom Hearts 2.8 Final Chapter Prologue* came out in 2017, with an HD remaster of *Dream Drop Distance*,

Dream Drop Distance* (3D, get it?) focuses again on Sora and Riku, and even brings in Neku from *The World Ends with You.

Hey, I didn't catch your name.

1/5
COMMANDS

515/ 600
PRIZES
01'03"41
TIME
COMMANDS
Mega Flare
Dodging Deflect
Aerial Brake
Diving Strike

the cinematic *Kingdom Hearts X Back Cover*, and *0.2: Birth by Sleep – A Fragmentary Passage*, a short new entry in which the player controls Aqua as she traverses the realm of darkness. This was created on the Unreal Engine 4 as a prelude to the type of visuals that would be seen in *Kingdom Hearts III*. All three collections were later packaged together as *The Story So Far* for the PS4 in late 2018.

After years of anticipation and many intervening non-numbered entries, *Kingdom Hearts III* was finally released in January 2019, concluding what Nomura called the "Dark Seeker Saga", which began with the first PS2 title. The hack-and-slash combat from the other numbered entries returns here, and is expanded upon again with new form changes and situation commands, and by enlarging the party size to five possible members at once. Sora can now also summon Disney theme park rides as special attacks, such as the Mad Tea Party and Big Thunder Mountain Railroad. New Disney worlds featured include those based on *Big Hero 6*, *Tangled*, *Frozen*, *Toy Story*, and *Monsters, Inc*. The visuals have seen a massive improvement, especially considering that all of the previous games were operating either on the level of the PlayStation 2 or that of various weaker portable platforms.

A DLC expansion, *Re Mind*, was released in early 2020. It contains three episodes: "Re Mind", "The Limitcut Episode", and "The Secret Episode". The first explores Sora's rescue of Kairi; he travels through time in order to reach her, before returning to the Destiny Islands and vanishing. The second takes place a year after Sora disappears, with his allies searching for him, ending with Yen Sid believing that Riku could find him. The third features Sora facing off against Yozora (a character seen earlier in a game-within-a-game in the *Toy Story* world, appearing as somewhat of an amalgamation of Nomura's many *Final Fantasy* designs) in Shibuya in Tokyo. *Kingdom Hearts III* received pretty positive reviews, and perhaps due to the long wait for it to release, sold gangbusters upon its arrival, shifting more than five million copies in its first week – making it the fastest- and best-selling title in the franchise.

In January 2020, Nomura said that "more time" would be needed before the next main entry in the series, which will presumably be starting a new story, now that the Dark Seeker Saga has concluded. That said, a new mobile game, *Kingdom Hearts Dark Road*, from the developers of *Union*, will focus on Xehanort and his backstory. Plus, a rhythm game called *Melody of Memory* was released in 2020.

What started as an oddball crossover between classic Disney characters and *Final Fantasy* has evolved into its own beast over the last two decades. Garnering a legion of dedicated fans, *Kingdom Hearts* has included manga and novels in addition to the numerous games, and regardless of what story may come next, you can bet that the fanbase will still be there to support it.

The bafflingly named *Kingdom Hearts II.8 Final Chapter Prologue* includes a short, original game focusing on one of the characters from *Birth by Sleep*.

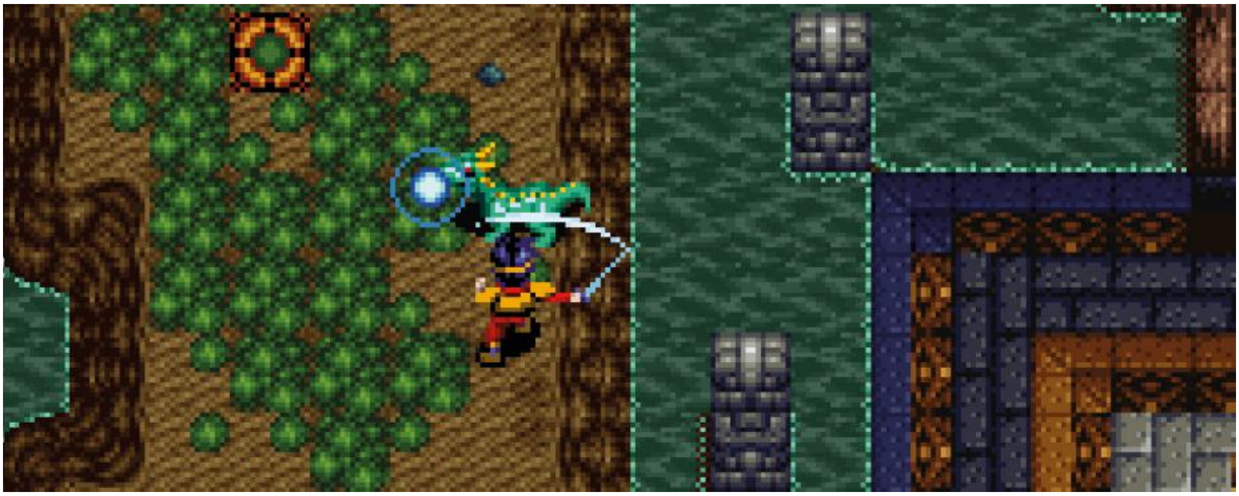
However, the darkness nearly took control of you.

But...Xehanort told us that room
isn't even his real room.

Jack, don't you give this creep the time of day.

PS4
KINGDOM HEARTS

After over a decade, *Kingdom Hearts III* finally continues the main story, greatly upgrading the graphics and integrating characters from many Pixar movies.



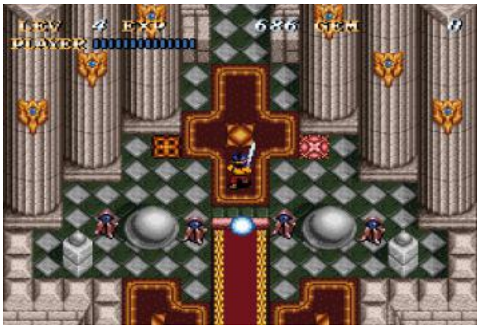
Soul Blazer

Developer: Quintet | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): SNES

Quintet's flagship franchise was a loose trio of action RPGs colloquially referred to as the Heaven & Earth Trilogy. The overarching theme concerns the philosophy of the amor fati and, more broadly, the cycle of death and rebirth. The concept is like memento mori, a reminder that all beings shall die.

Soul Blazer is itself a follow-up to Quintet's creative debut *ActRaiser*, in which "the Master" (God) governed humanity from his celestial throne, occasionally coming to Earth to vanquish demons directly. In *Soul Blazer*, the Master sends his emissary to restore a ravaged world. The avaricious King Magridd has forced the brilliant Dr. Leo to build a machine capable of entering the World of Evil, taking the doctor's daughter Lisa as collateral. With the portal opened, Magridd then forged a pact with the evil god Deathtoll, by which the king would receive a piece of gold for each living being sacrificed. Soon the king had become rich, and the entire world barren. It's cartoonishly black-and-white, but a background that serves the progression well: the hero, Blazer, armed with his trusty sword, travels to various regions previously taken by Deathtoll, initially facing an empty field that was once a town. Dungeons are filled with a finite number of monster lairs: portals from which a set number of monsters emerges. Once these are vanquished the lair can be sealed, causing a permanent effect within the world – typically, the revival of a living being.

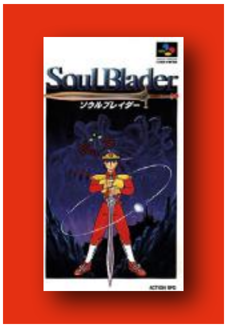
The living beings Blazer restores aren't always people; he has the ability to converse with all living things, so he also rescues plants, animals, and even inanimate objects, reflecting tsukumogami folklore, in which well-used tools gain sentience. A notable interaction early on is when Blazer restores a man and a goat. The man grieves for his late wife, but finds warmth in the goat's presence. When Blazer speaks to the goat, she's actually the man's wife reincarnated, enjoying the presence of her beloved despite being unable to communicate. It's these ancillary moments in which *Soul Blazer* most effectively communicates its themes



The combat isn't Quintet's finest. Enemy AI is very limited: they either ram into Blazer, or hang back and fire projectiles. In addition to mêlée fight skills, Blazer can cast projectile spells, once he gains access to the necessary rotating orb. Ironically, spells cost gold to cast, which is gathered from slain monsters.

Soul Blazer's environments are varied and a few are particularly striking; most notably a miniature model town divided by a Lego-esque river, where you're beset by a miniscule military. Rock musician Yukihide Takekawa handled the soundtrack, which has its moments: a sorrowful little tune serves as the town music, and once you've restored the town, it transitions into a happy, major-key version, in a nice touch. The dungeon themes are plentiful, though their reliance on *Seinfeld*-esque bass tends to add an unintentionally comic edge.

While *Soul Blazer* may be overshadowed by its successors, they undoubtedly build upon its framework, and its influence can be seen in Level-5's *Dark Cloud*.



The Japanese cover art for *Soul Blazer* (originally known as *Soul Blader*) isn't fantastic, but it is more distinctive than the generic-looking cover of the American version.

Illusion of Gaia

Developer: Quintet | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SNES

PLAYER
DP
82
ENEMY

Famed shoujo manga artist Moto Hagio provided the character designs for this game, though that's not really apparent from the Western packaging.

Quintet enlisted some heavy duty talent for *Illusion of Gaia*: award-winning sci-fi author Mariko Oohara penned the scenario, while shoujo mangaka Moto Hagio handled the character designs – the resulting sprites, unfortunately, were unrecognisable. Nintendo, seeing a winner on its hands, stepped in as Western publisher. And they were right – *Illusion of Gaia* was a critics darling that was also Quintet's best seller.

Will is a boy living with his grandparents, after his explorer parents disappeared investigating the Tower of Babel. Undeterred, Will wishes to follow in their footsteps and traverse the world himself. When the spoiled Princess Kara sneaks out of Edward Castle and into Will's home, he soon finds himself thrown into the castle dungeon, but escapes with the help of some new friends. Soon, Will's off to visit the wonders of the world, guided by the goddess Gaia, tasked with stopping an encroaching comet.

Will's got a decent action suite: he can swing his flute like a sword, execute a lunge attack for extra damage at the expense of vulnerability, and eventually gains three additional moves for traversing obstacles. He also gains the ability to metamorphose into two other forms: Freedan the Dark Knight, a long-dead warrior; and Shadow, an ethereal being born of the comet. Both are heartier and more combat-oriented than Will, with the trade-off that they cannot use his traversing abilities. Freedan gains his own suite of attack-based abilities; while Shadow, gained at the penultimate dungeon, has the ability to melt into the floor to avoid attacks or reach lower levels.

Illusion of Gaia is light on RPG mechanics: there are no weapons, armour, spells, or levels you can gain. Unlike *Soul Blazer*, this game bestows stat boosts for elimination of all monsters from a floor. However, if you miss any, they'll be awarded after the next boss encounter, smartly ensuring the game never becomes unwinnable.

The seven main dungeons are a mix of mythological places and world heritage sites, such as Mu and the Great Wall of China. While treasure-hunting tales can be problematic, Oohara made sure to critique colonialism. Early on, Will visits the beautiful City of Freejia. However, there's a dark side: indigenous people are sold at the slave market. This reveal is not a one-and-done plot beat; it sets the tone for the story, an unflinching portrait of man-made misery. An early comment that the carpets of Edward Castle take 40 years to weave is seen in practice near the end, where Will encounters four slaves who have been weaving the carpets since they were children, their life sentence continuing. It doesn't always hit the mark, though; a sequence in which the heroes are captured by a cannibal tribe is bound to raise an eyebrow.

On the whole, *Illusion of Gaia* is an incredibly solemn experience, and one punctuated by quiet scenes, such as when Will and Kara float adrift on a raft for a month, catching fish to stay alive. These moments of reflection, quite unlike anything else in the 16-bit era, make for a distinctly literary title.

Terranigma

Developer: Quintet | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SNES

Terranigma (*Tenchi Souzou*, or "The Creation of Heaven and Earth") was only released in Japan, Europe and Australia, which resulted in its status as a legendary holy grail among Super Nintendo RPGs. It's well-deserved, too – *Terranigma* is not only the perfect capstone to Heaven and Earth, but also one of the finest 16-bit action RPGs ever released.

Long before the start of the game, Earth went through an entire life-cycle, from prehistory to the post-industrial era. Somewhere in Antarctica, a cataclysmic battle between the forces of light and darkness ended the world entirely, sending all its continents deep below the earth's surface. Hundreds of years later, the subterranean village of Crysta is a pastoral oasis in a ruined world of lava and stone. The hero is Ark, a boy who was taken in as a baby by the village elder. One day, at the urging of other youths, he enters the elder's forbidden basement and opens a box, setting the demon Yomi free, and turning all of Crysta's residents to stone, save for the elder and Ark himself. The elder tasks Ark with conquering five towers to revive the fallen continents – only then will the people of Crysta return to life. Yomi, not necessarily an evil being, accompanies Ark as his guide and his medium between reality and the world of the box, which, in a very stylish move, functions as the player's status menus.

Terranigma is undoubtedly the most "RPG" of the trilogy; weapons, armour, and experience levels are back, à la *Soul Blazer*, along with the addition of shops, commerce, and a retooled magic system based around consumable jewels. Ark's weapon of choice is a spear, of which there's a number of different varieties to be found or purchased throughout the world. He's pretty handy with it too, boasting a wide variety of attacks for all occasions, including aerial moves.

LEVEL
25
ITEM
LIFE
90/263
4604

A few areas require you to kill key monsters to solve puzzles, but it's no longer an overt part of the gameplay loop.

Once Ark has revived both Crysta and the continents, the elder sends him off to the surface to revive all life on the planet. He begins reviving plant-life, then animals, and eventually humans. It's a gripping story once it gets going, though one with fewer quiet moments than *Illusion of Gaia*. That's not to say it doesn't have its pensive scenes, such as when a goat is forced to eat her recently deceased husband to avoid starvation, in a stunning demonstration of the circle of life. It's once humanity is revived that the macro plot shifts gears to become a thoughtful pondering on the Nietzschean theory of Eternal Recurrence, while also grappling with Malthusian ecofascism.

As our world continues to face a looming climate crisis, the complex ideas of time and mortality put forth in the Heaven and Earth series feel more prescient than ever. Tragically, none of the games has received a single re-release to date. Perhaps it's a fitting fate for the series: time is fleeting and life, as ephemeral as it is, goes on.

TERRANIGMA
SUPER NINTENDO

There were huge numbers of 16-bit JRPGs that were never released in Europe, but at least there was *Terranigma* as a consolation prize.

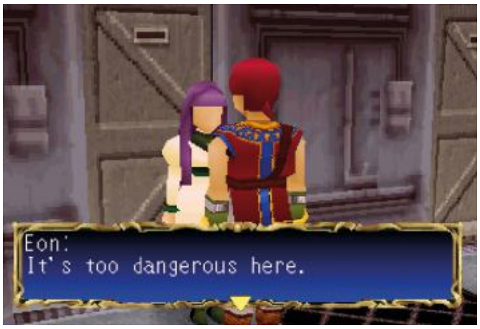
The Granstream Saga

Developer: Shade | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1

Although *Terranigma* is widely considered to be the end of Heaven & Earth, there was a fourth title that's essentially a spiritual successor to the series, with a number of the same staff behind it. Enter Shade, a Quintet subsidiary, whose debut was *The Granstream Saga*, a PlayStation action RPG. While distinct from Quintet's oeuvre, it still shares many themes. Notably, this was the first video game to feature animation by Production I.G, with co-founder Takayuki Goto providing the character designs.

Much like its predecessors, *Granstream* takes place in the aftermath of a great cataclysm that destroyed the world entirely, leaving four islands floating in the sky above the ocean. On the island of Shilf, Eon lives with his foster father Valos, where the two have the duty of periodically slicing bits off their landmass to delay its inevitable descent beneath the waves. One day, when the two are exploring an ancient ruin, Eon's powers awaken, giving him both the task of restoring the world (by obtaining its magical orbs) and the strength to complete it. He must therefore seek out the orbs' inheritors, the first of whom, Arcia, has been abducted by the Imperial Wizardry. Striking up an unlikely alliance with Laramee, femme fatale of the Desbat Sky Pirates, he rescues Arcia, and the pair become the de-facto administrators of Airlim, a sentient tower governing what's left of the world. Together, the group travel in their quest for salvation.

Granstream is a relatively simple game. Weapons, armour, and even levels, are only gained at predetermined points. Enemies appear directly on the map, and are quite spread out: battles are strictly one-on-one fencing duels between Eon and his opponent. Each enemy must be approached correctly for its type; you can break their guard, try to out-manoeuvre them, or keep your shield up (to approach a mage from a distance). Monsters can be the most difficult opponents, as they are often more agile than the player. That said, combat functions surprisingly well for a 3D action RPG from 1997, one of the first of its kind.



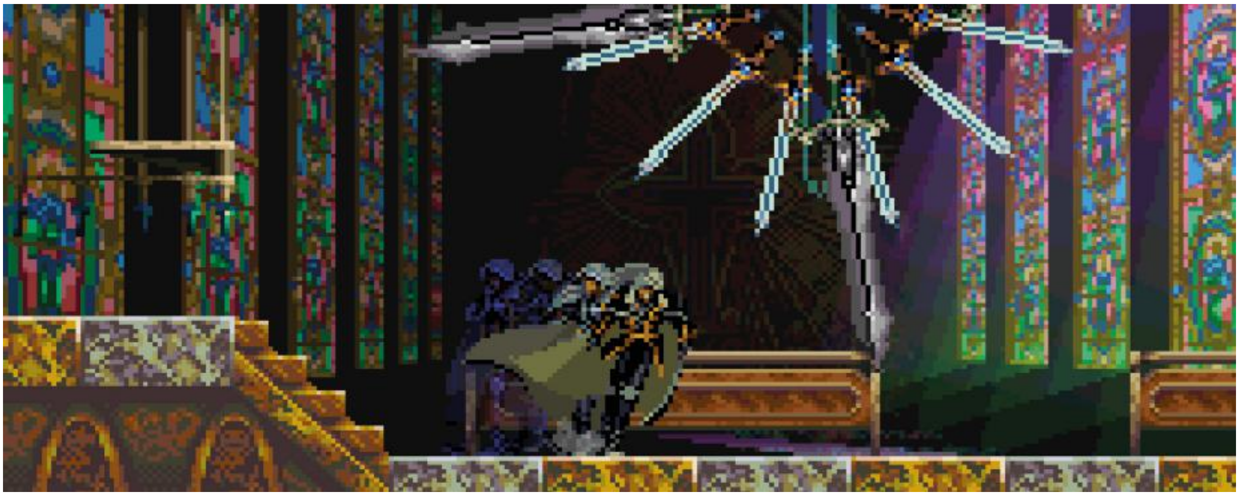
Eon:
It's too dangerous here.

PlayStation
GRANSTREAM SAGA
THQ

While not technically connected to the Quintet Heaven and Earth trilogy, this PS1 game is a kind of successor to them, although it is quite unwieldy, as were most 3D 32-bit action games.

Dungeons tend to be relatively lonely mazes broken up by combat encounters, but they do include some light puzzles, many of which require the player to think outside the box, and even fight against the interface itself. Eon has in his possession a sceptre capable of storing and replicating any object, and *Granstream* regularly delights in misdirection by offering a number of red-herring verbs to obfuscate this tried-and-true solution. It's a fun touch.

Due to its primitive graphics, *Granstream* hasn't aged particularly well, and was even maligned somewhat at publication. Released in a post-*Final Fantasy VII* world, the camera angle is placed directly overhead and at a tight angle. When the camera does transition, every character is revealed as distractingly low-poly, devoid of a single facial feature. Perhaps a little distance was needed to prove that *Granstream*, while not the most eye-catching, isn't a bad PS1 RPG by any stretch.



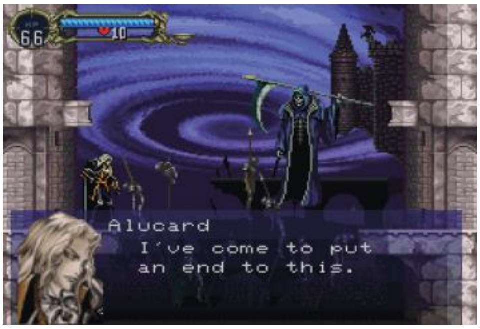
Castlevania (series)

Developer: Konami | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): NES, SNES, GEN, GB, PS1, GBA, PSP, DS and more

In 1986, Konami published *Castlevania* for the NES, starring vampire hunter Simon Belmont as he adventures through a haunted castle to defeat the evil Count Dracula. The excellent graphics, fantastic soundtrack, and difficult but rewarding action worked together to create one of the best games on the system, which began a long-running franchise. Around the same time, there was an MSX2 computer version, unreleased in North America, but known in Europe as *Vampire Killer*. While the NES game was straightforward action, this take was slightly different, requiring that Simon explore each section of the stage, hunting for secrets and looking for hearts, which could be used to purchase items.

Vampire Killer was used as the basis for the game's NES sequel, *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*, which reworks the concept into an open-ended action RPG in which Simon explores Transylvania for the five body parts of Dracula. As you slay skeletons, werewolves, and zombies, the hearts they drop can be used to purchase more powerful whips, extra subweapons, and important items like garlic. However, there is a distinct lack of direction, and the only clues come from the townspeople, whose statements are confusing or useless. Even though it's quite opaque, its haunting atmosphere and incredible soundtrack still earned it admiration from NES fans.

For a number of years, *Castlevania* reverted to the action-platformer formula of the NES game, until the release of *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* for the PlayStation in 1997. The star is Alucard, the rebellious half-vampire son of Dracula, who must explore the many areas of his father's castle to take him down. The game is structured similarly to *Metroid*, in that you'll find new abilities as you explore further, including the ability to take bat, wolf, or mist form to explore previously inaccessible areas. There are tons of secrets, revealing items that will expand your health and life meters, but there are also plenty of proper RPG elements not found in *Metroid*, including experience levels, currency, and tons of equipment. Its rich level of detail, along with the high-quality 2D visuals and excellent soundtrack, again earned it accolades.



Alucard
I've come to put
an end to this.

ACTION GAME

***Symphony of the Night* co-director Koji Igarashi noted that the game was basically *Zelda,* but presented as a side-scrolling platformer.**

2D games went out of fashion in the 32-bit era and beyond, but *Symphony of the Night* maintained its fervent fanbase, and Konami continued with similarly styled games for portable Nintendo platforms. This distinct style eventually earned it the fan-given sub-genre moniker "Metroidvania", a portmantaeu of "*Metroid*" and "*Castlevania*". This sub-series continued until 2008's *Order of Ecclesia* for the DS, after which Konami transferred its efforts to its Western-developed *Lords of Shadow* games. Series producer Koji Igarashi soon left the company, then he Kickstarted *Bloodstained*, which was basically a new RPG-style *Castlevania* in all but name. While the Metroidvania sub-genre has proliferated thanks to indie developers, it's important not to forget the games that started it all.

Monster World (series)

Developer: Westone | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): ARC, SMS, GG, GEN, WIN, PS4, NSW, XB1

Westone's *Wonder Boy* series began life as an arcade platformer, in which you control a caveboy running through a jungle to save his girlfriend. (The game is perhaps more widely known as *Adventure Island* from Hudson for the NES, which replaced the hero with its own mascot.) The sequel, *Wonder Boy in Monster Land*, is wildly different, as the hero trades his hammer and grass skirt for a sword and armour, and the setting moves to a medieval fantasy world. But it also introduces some RPG elements – there are plenty of shops that sell upgraded equipment, money is obtained either by defeating enemies or from hidden caches, and earning points will eventually expand your health meter. There are plenty of secrets, including a sub-quest that greatly helps in navigating the labyrinthine final level. However, since it's still level-based and linear, you can't double back to previous areas, so you need to restart if you miss something important, and it's quite challenging. The game was ported many times to other platforms and computers, most popularly the SEGA Master System.

Westone committed to the action-RPG format more firmly with the next game, known as *Wonder Boy: The Dragon's Trap* internationally and *Monster World II* in Japan. The hero from the original games gets cursed with the form of a dragon, requiring that he venture through the open-ended world to find a cure. As he defeats more bosses, he changes into other animal forms with different abilities that let him access new areas. The distinctive, cutesy character designs and catchy soundtrack earned it a reputation as one of the best games on the platform. Unlike its predecessors, which began as arcade games, this entry was created for the Master System and also saw various ports, as well as a greatly enhanced revision in 2017 courtesy of Lizardcube, which provides redrawn HD graphics.

Wonder Boy in Monster Land was one of the first action RPGs to be released in the arcade, and eventually evolved into the open-world exploration-based format of its subsequent console entries, as seen here in Wonder Boy: The Dragon's Trap.

Wonder Boy in Monster World is the follow-up for the Genesis, and is similar to its predecessor, though rather than changing animal forms, you find little sprites that fly next to the hero, Shion. The next entry, *Monster World IV*, ditched the *Wonder Boy* name, as it stars a female character, a green-haired girl named Asha. It moves the world into an Arabian setting, and it also dials back on the RPG elements, removing the exploration. This is one of the most gorgeous games on the Mega Drive, but it didn't see international publication until a re-release in 2012.

For a long time, the *Monster World* series slept, but French developer Game Atelier revived it in 2018. The new game, *Monster Boy and the Cursed Kingdom*, is *Monster World V* in all but name. You again take different animal forms, but the level design is better, adding challenging reflex-based puzzles, and creating a much larger and more intricate world than its 16-bit predecessors. Together with some gorgeous 2D visuals, it's the perfect tribute to one of the best side-scrolling action RPGs of the '90s.

Brave Fencer Musashi

Developer: Square | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1

Musashi Miyamoto is one of Japan's most legendary samurai heroes, with numerous books, anime, and video games based on his tales. In this PlayStation action RPG from Square, he's a super-deformed little dude, defending the Allucaneat Kingdom from the evil Thirstquencher Empire. It's quite a silly little game, especially since most of the characters are named after food, but the localisation captures much of the humour, and even the voice acting, a first for a Square title, is relatively decent.

Brave Fencer Musashi is entirely in 3D, with its own set of pluses and minuses. It predates the Dual Shock analogue controller, so digital movement is a bit of a problem. Musashi wields two swords, Fusion and Lumina, but their reach is pretty short, and it can be hard to hit enemies. Parts of the game use fixed cameras, and while you can rotate them in certain areas, like the central town, it can be confusing to navigate.

But *Brave Fencer Musashi* sets itself apart from other early action RPGs by means of its platforming elements. The hero can jump, and many dungeons include lots of floating things to jump onto, in between hacking up enemies. Much of the game is presented from an overhead perspective, but it occasionally changes to a side-scrolling one, giving a dynamic feel to the different areas. Musashi can also use one of his swords to steal the powers from almost every enemy in the game, allowing for a large set of skills, most of which are used to solve simple puzzles. Musashi is also pretty strong for such a little guy, and can pick up and toss almost any enemy. His arsenal can be expanded through the use of elementals spells found in the course of the adventure. Finding parts of the legendary army will also grant new abilities, like a double jump.

The game world of *Brave Fencer Musashi* isn't all that large, but it feels remarkably rich. Each NPC has a unique name and personality, most of them having some kind of job in the village. Many have been kidnapped at the outset of the adventure, and encased in crystals that are scattered about the kingdom; saving these guys will also increase your Bincho Power (BP) magic gauge. The game has a day/night cycle, with certain events taking place at certain times, while you need to make sure Musashi gets enough rest.

The character models are expressive, and the whole experience is quite charming. The music, from Tsuyoshi Sekito, has a strong main theme, and the music expresses the full range of emotion, from bombastic and heroic action themes to serene town melodies. The amusing cast, of both friends and foes, along with the arcade-style elements, make this one the best games of its kind for the PlayStation. A PS2 pseudo-sequel released in 2005 called *Musashi: Samurai Legend* disappointingly removes almost all of the RPG elements, and instead puts the emphasis on action, with flashier character designs that lack the personality found in its predecessor.

PlayStation
MUSASHI
SQUARESOFT

Tetsuya Nomura did the packaging illustrations for this game, though most of the characters were created by Kouji Ogata.

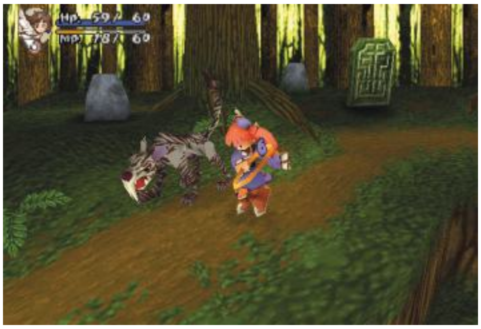
Threads of Fate

Developer: Square | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1

Threads of Fate (*Dewprism* in Japan) is an action RPG roughly similar to Square's earlier PlayStation title *Brave Fencer Musashi*. One of its major draws is that it features two completely different main characters, each with their own storyline. Rue is a stoic boy with amnesia, while Mint is a deposed princess looking to regain her throne. Both are searching for a mysterious relic called the Dewprism, which will help them obtain their goals.

Each of the heroes has a magical ability – Mint has a variety of spells, while Rue can change form into nearly any monster you come across. They also wield different weapons – Rue, a gigantic sword; Mint, two large rings – though otherwise they play rather similarly. Despite the different storylines, and their occasional meetings, they both go through the same set of levels, so your choice of character doesn't drastically change the experience. Rue's monster transformations should be interesting in theory, but neither the story nor the level designs make much out of it.

Rue is also a tremendously boring character. There's nothing particularly interesting about his story, or his quest to both regain his memory and find his lost friend. Mint, on the other hand, is one of the most charming heroines to be found in any RPG. She's spoiled, greedy, and conniving; she also has a hilariously odd aversion to pumpkins. She's also deemed too incompetent to rule and kicked out of her position by her sister, who, to be fair, is entirely correct to do so. This sibling rivalry creates an interesting dynamic, and their banter helps elevate a rather standard storyline. You can play as Mint and skip over Rue completely, and you wouldn't miss much. Overall, there's little to justify the split between the two heroes, and it would've been better if the game let you play as both, either alternating or letting you swap between them at will.

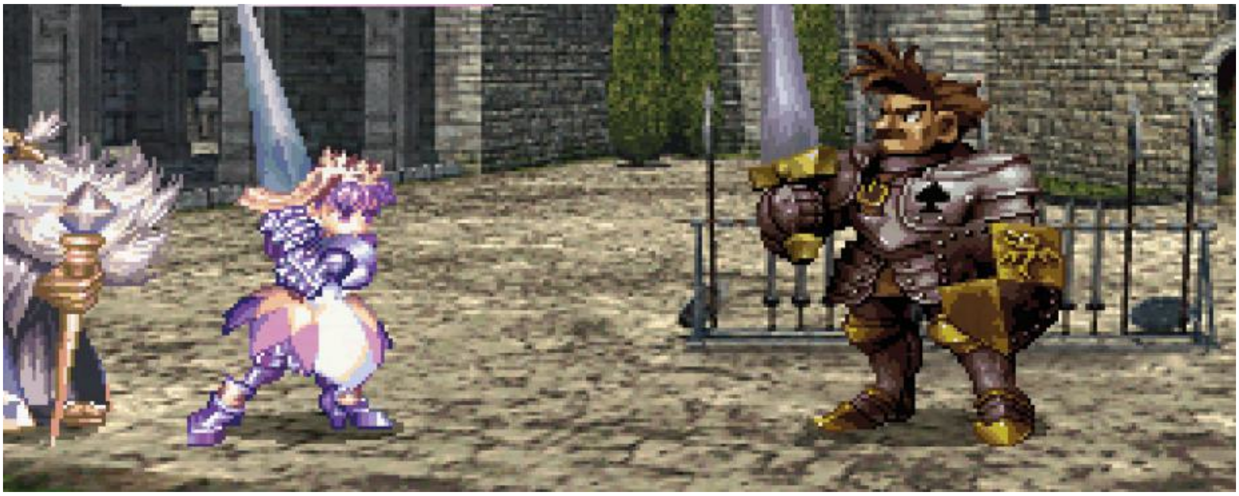


PlayStation
Threads of Fate
SQUARESOFT

Outside of the two scenarios, *Threads of Fate* is a bit on the simple side. There's no overworld, just a single town that acts as a hub for all of the other areas. There are no experience levels either, so HP and MP stats just grow slowly as you fight enemies; there's also not much in the way of equipment or items to buy. The fighting feels simplistic, it's hard to tell when enemies are attacking, the lock-on function is dodgy, and the camera is too zoomed-in. There isn't much platforming, but what is there is somewhat wretched. It's clear that Square was still working out 3D action.

Still, the visuals are quite well done, with crisp textures and polygons, colourful environments, and wonderfully animated characters. The cutscenes are expressive too, despite the lack of voice acting. The music was composed by Junya Nakano, who later worked on *Final Fantasy X*, and there's a pleasant wistfulness to it. Overall, it's certainly not as ambitious or grandiose as Square's other RPGs of the era, but the ambience, writing, and (especially) Mint's presence elevates it to the level of minor classic.

It's a little simple, and both the combat and the platforming have some issues, but the charming Princess Mint keeps *Threads of Fate* afloat.



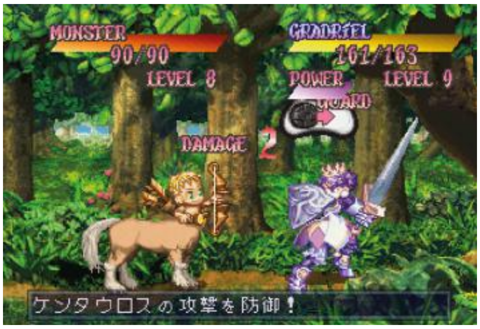
Princess Crown

Developer: SEGA/Atlus | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): SAT, PSP, PS4

George Kamitani is a game designer who got his start as a pixel artist, working for companies like Capcom, before helming the SEGA Saturn game *Princess Crown*, a joint production between SEGA and Atlus. The game stars the young Gradriel de Valendia, newly appointed queen of the land, who has begun to explore the world outside of her castle walls, eventually undertaking a quest to save her kingdom from an ancient demon god. Though Gradriel is the star, there are three other protagonists – Proserpina, the troublesome witch, Edward, the knight in shining armour, and Portgus, the hero pirate. Each has their own scenarios, in which they become playable characters, and only by playing through all of their stories can you unlock the true ending.

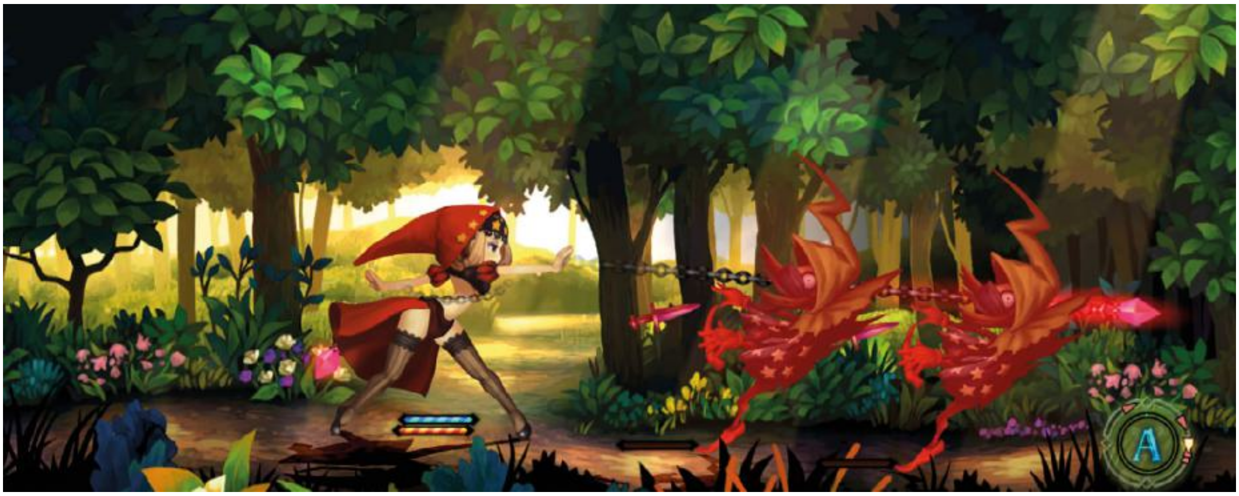
The Saturn was known for its high-quality 2D games, and *Princess Crown* might be one of the best-looking games on the system. It has an art style patterned after Western fantasy, mixed with the brightly colours preferred in Japan. The character sprites are half the size of the screens, and incredibly well animated; there's an impressive level of detail in every movement. Gradriel, ever the proper lady, runs with her arms to her side, but she's properly fierce when wielding her sword, which is as tall as she is. That sword is technically carried by her fairy familiar, who delivers it when enemy encounters begin and whisks it away when they're done. The enemies show just as much personality – the goblins are cute and fuzzy and malicious all at the same time, while ghosts will bless themselves with the sign of the cross before expiring.

The realm of Valendia is divided into several interconnecting side-scrolling areas. As Gradriel traverses each area, she may come across a foe, which she fights one-on-one. While this might suggest an arcade-style battle system, it also plays much more slowly, as you need to conserve your strikes and monitor your power so you're not left too weak to strike. This sluggishness is one of the weaker parts of the game, as the action looks fantastic but doesn't feel as snappy as it should. There are secondary weapons you can chuck at foes, like magical gems that provide various benefits until they break. There's also a sub-system whereby you can plant seeds in the middle of battle to yield health-restoring fruit, and can collect food items to combine and cook, making powerful healing items. The incredible level of detail does have a downside – there are a limited number of backgrounds and enemies, and everything grows repetitive.



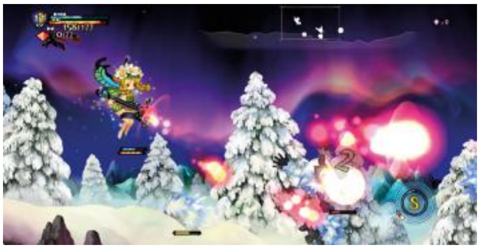
While *Princess Crown*'s strengths lie more in its style than its execution, it's still an incredible work of art, and set down the pattern for later games from Kamitani. While the game was initially a flop, it has remained a cult classic over the years, first released as a straight PSP port, then later brought over to the PlayStation 4 as a pre-order bonus for Kamitani's strategy/adventure game *13 Sentinels*, though it has never been localised.

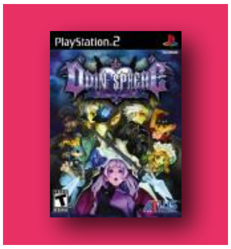
George Kamitani's skill as an artist shows through in *Princess Crown*, one of most gorgeous-looking titles on the Saturn.



Odin Sphere

Developer: Vanillaware | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): PS2, PS3, PS4, PSV





While not technically a sequel to *Princess Crown, Odin Sphere* is most definitely its successor, inheriting its strengths (beautiful visuals) and its flaws (frustrating combat). Thankfully, it got a second chance for a tune-up with the re-released version, *Leifthrasir.*

It took nearly a decade, but *Princess Crown* received a spiritual follow-up on the PlayStation 2, called *Odin Sphere*. Taking place in a world inspired by Norse mythology, with a dose of Shakespearean tragedy, you play through the viewpoints of five characters, each working to stop an impending apocalypse caused by a powerful weapon called the Crystallization Cauldron. The heroes are Gwendolyn, the Valkyrie princess and daughter of the demon lord Odin; Cornelius, a prince who's been cursed with the form of a rabbit-like Pooka; Mercedes, the fairy princess at war with Odin; Oswald, the dark knight who's in love with Gwendolyn; and Velvet, a mysterious red-hooded witch.

The continent is divided into nine stages – forests, volcanic caverns, snow-covered mountains, and so forth – each with several areas. Most of the fields loop around infinitely, with passageways that will take you to other parts of the stage. Battles are no longer one-on-one, as in *Princess Crown*; instead you fight hordes of enemies before moving onward. There are many special attacks associated with your weapons, plus magical potions with various strong abilities, but you can also plant seeds. These grow using Phozons, the life force that emerges from fallen enemies, and bear fruit that will not only heal you but increase your experience level.

Hitoshi Sakimoto's company Basiscape provided the soundtrack, which includes a hauntingly beautiful Celtic-inspired main theme. George Kamitani's skills as an artist are made exceedingly apparent, as it's one of the most gorgeous titles on the PlayStation 2. This kind of high resolution 2D artwork was generally believed to be too expensive, but Vanillaware makes it work, with incredible amounts of detail and care put into character animation. But as with *Princess Crown*, this does eventually affect the game – in each of the character's five stories, you need to play through seven of the nine areas, and they don't really change much, leading to an incredible amount of repetition by the time you've reached the epilogue. Each character has a different play style at least – Gwendolyn with her diving spear attacks, Cornelius with his spinning sword slashes, Mercedes with her flying abilities and machine gun-like magic crossbow, and Velvet with her whip-like chains.

The combat is still pretty rough in the original PS2 version, one of the biggest issues being a POW meter that decreases with every attack and stuns your character if you run out, as well as substantial slowdown, particularly in boss battles. Vanillaware refined its combat mechanics in subsequent titles, including the action-focused *Muramasa: The Demon Blade* and the arcade beat-'em-up tribute *Dragon's Crown*. So when it remade *Odin Sphere* for the PS3, PS4, and Vita, subtitled *Leifthrasir*, it drastically tuned up the mechanics, including snappier combat among numerous other additions, like HD visuals, changes to the levelling system, removing slowdown, and providing a greater variety of area types. Together, these elevate an enchanting but flawed experience into a modern action RPG classic.

Dark Cloud (series)

Developer: Level-5 | Released: 2001 | Platform(s): PS2

Dark Cloud and *Dark Cloud 2* (the latter also known around the world as *Dark Chronicle*) are where developer Level-5, later known for *Professor Layton* and *Yo-kai Watch*, got its start. *Dark Cloud* was one of the first JRPGs on the PS2 and was positioned as Sony's counterpart to *The Legend of Zelda*, though in practice it's quite different. It did get attention for its unique mechanics, a sort of spin on *ActRaiser* that combined the world-building elements with 3D action dungeon crawls. Both games task you with exploring a set of dungeons, each hiding elements of a destroyed outside world. You then use these, in the right area, to restore life there, rebuilding structures and wildlife. Completing a dungeon also ends its story arc, giving the stories an episodic feel.

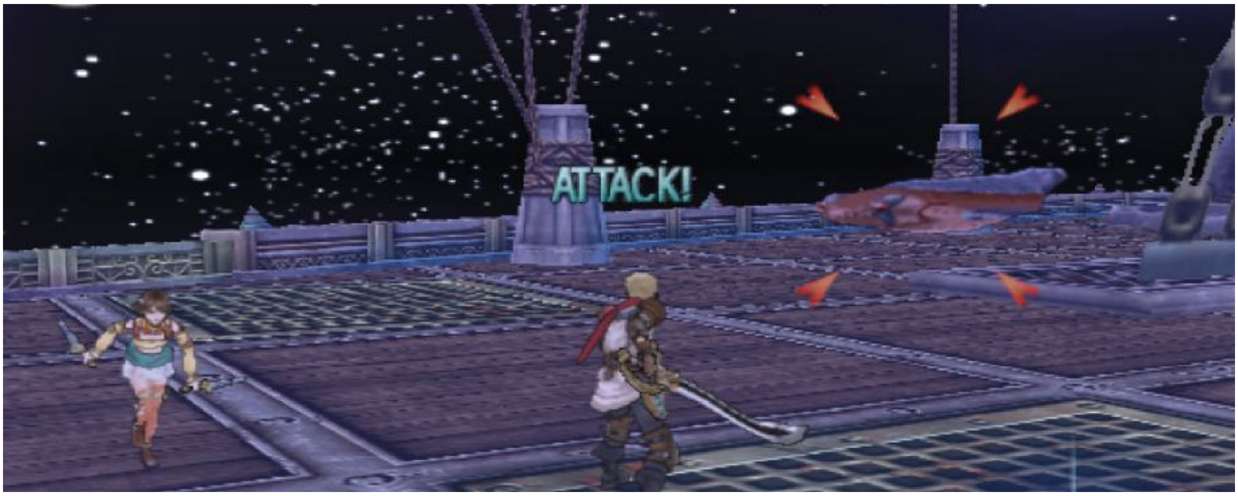
The first game is a little basic, being an early title for the PS2, but the sequel further develops its ideas, with a slightly more fleshed-out combat system and a focus on two protagonists, instead of a quiet hero and various companions. Max, the boy from a present-day town, uses a gun and can summon a battle mecha to ride for tougher fights, while time-traveller Monica can use magic spells and turn into various monsters. Max's robot can also be customised, and Monica's form set can be expanded by finding badges. The visuals are also substantially improved, rendered with gorgeous cel-shading. The world-rebuilding is also given a greater story context, by means of building goals that, if achieved, allow certain future events to occur. In both games, you can also level up your weapons, though they have limited durability; the second game improves the system by having worn weapons be less useful until repaired instead of breaking. *Chronicle* even has a complex idea system, where you can combine ideas from photos to craft new inventions.

The first game focuses on a larger journey, to stop an evil, world-destroying genie with a dark and dramatic late game twist, after a few short stories involving controllable party members acquired in dungeons. It's nothing too complex, which made the sequel's complexities a surprise, with conflicts between Max and Monica, and a much more substantial villain at the story's core. The episodic dungeon stories are also stronger, and have clear cinematic endings, with good English-language voice work. There is clear heart in these games, and they're a great example of what Level-5 was capable of.

What keeps the *Dark Cloud* series buried these days is that it's difficult to get a read on its identity, beyond the generic dungeon crawling and the world-rebuilding gimmick. The aesthetic feels very random, combining fantasy, sci-fi, steampunk, and all sorts of other stuff that looks cool but doesn't feel coherent. Where the first game was more on the bland side, the second feels like a collage that can't decide on a single look or concept. *Dark Cloud* is a difficult series to "get", at a basic level, but there's a rewarding amount of design complexity to dig into especially in the second game.

PlayStation 2
Dark Cloud 2

***Dark Cloud* was never the *Zelda*-killer Sony pitched it as, but it evolved into a fairly interesting game that deserves another chance.**



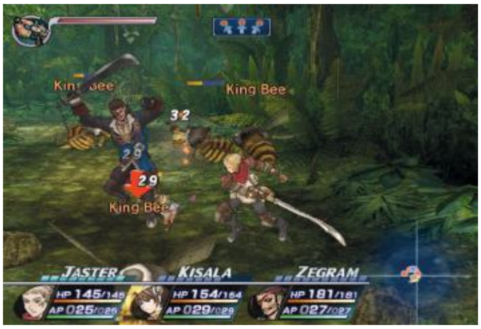
Rogue Galaxy

Developer: Level-5 | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): PS2

Rogue Galaxy stars a young man named Jaster Rogue, a farmer on the desert planet Rosa, who resents the occupation by the Longardian Federation. He very quickly finds himself being drafted by a group of space pirates; they believe him to be a legendary figure known as Desert Claw. He isn't, but doesn't put them straight, allowing him to leave his dusty home behind. He then begins an adventure that is basically anime *Star Wars*.

Like *Dark Cloud*, *Rogue Galaxy* uses an action-based battle system. When walking through dangerous areas, you'll randomly be surprised by groups of foes. For the fight, you control one character while your two companions are governed by AI. They may shout requests, typically to cure or revive them, which you can comply with using a simple button press. While the combat can be fun, it has some issues – primarily, a power meter that requires you to rest for several seconds after attacking too often, plus camera and lock-on functions that tend to be kinda wonky. Characters can be upgraded using a system called Revelation Flow, similar to *Final Fantasy XII*'s License Grid, plus weapons can be synthesised once that type's been used enough. There are tons of sub-quests and some interesting mini-games, the best one involving Insectrons, which can be trained and used in strategy-type competitions.

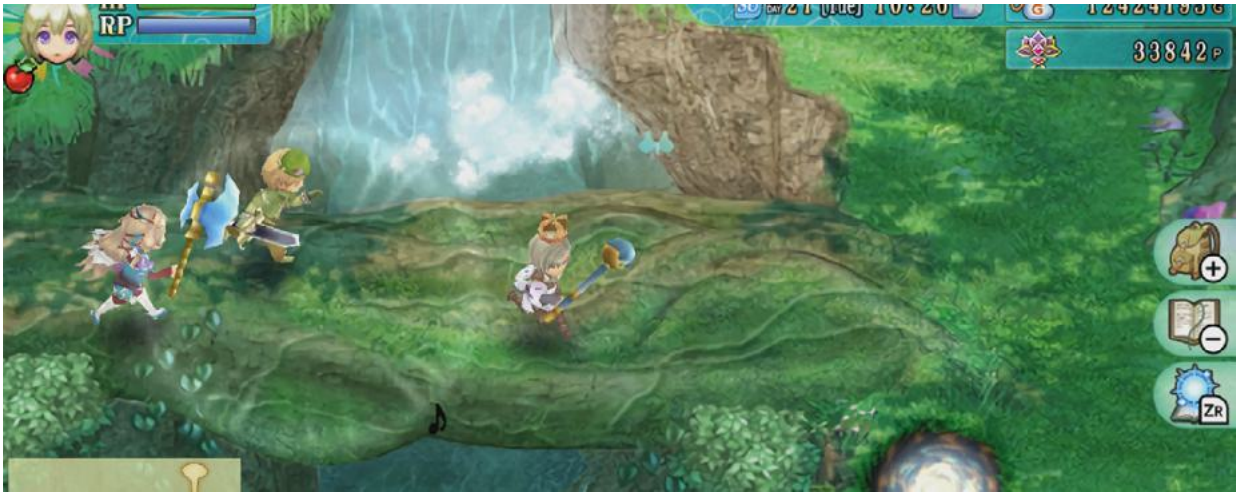
As Level-5's third original title, *Rogue Galaxy* exemplified the type of games they'd later produce, like *Ni no Kuni* and *Yo-kai Watch* – games with outstanding production values that make an excellent first impression, but begin to fall apart the more you play them. For example, *Rogue Galaxy* is a gorgeous-looking game. The anime space-pirate aesthetic may just be an update of the classic *Captain Harlock*, imagining sea vessels as sci-fi spaceships, but damned if it isn't cool. It features cel-shaded visuals, a diverse cast of characters consisting of humans, robots, and aliens, and tons of beautiful locales. It's also impressive from a technical standpoint, as load times are minimised and large environments are streamed without them breaking up. But then those lovely locales give way to long and repetitive hallway dungeons, featuring repeated, straightforward enemy encounters. Unlike those of *Dark Cloud*, the stages aren't randomly generated, but they sure feel like they are. The story is also pretty bad, relying on too many predictable tropes and story beats at the start, and then failing to generate anything interesting as the plot drags on.



Rogue Galaxy was obviously hugely ambitious but it strained the company's resources. It was intended to be one of Sony's leading RPG franchises, but it received a chilly reception from Japanese gamers, thanks to its tedious gameplay. It received a director's cut re-release that mitigated, but didn't entirely fix, these issues, which was the version released internationally. In the end, if you get swept up in the grand space-opera adventure it offers, it can provide a great time, but it also requires you to deal with some significant issues.

PlayStation 2
ROGUE GALAXY

***Rogue Galaxy* seems impressive out of the box, but its faults begin to show the more you play it.**



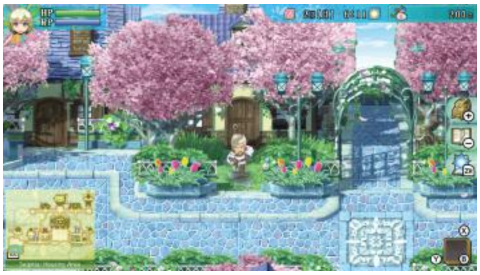
Rune Factory (series)

Developer: Neverland | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): DS, 3DS, PS3, WII, NSW

Farming simulation games have proven popular across many console generations, allowing for some chilled, slow-paced fun. This type of game was established by Natsume's *Harvest Moon* for the SNES, inspiring many sequels as well as assorted spinoffs. The *Rune Factory* franchise created a more action-focused spin on the genre when it debuted in 2006, blending the micro-management of a functioning farm with action RPG combat in a fantasy environment, for a highly unusual gaming experience.

The franchise contains six games: *Rune Factory: A Fantasy Harvest Moon, Rune Factory 2, Rune Factory: Frontier, Rune Factory 3, Rune Factory: Tides of Destiny*, and *Rune Factory 4*. The numbered entries were all released on the Nintendo DS family of handhelds, while the others were console releases on the Wii and PlayStation 3. An enhanced port of *Rune Factory 4* was released on the Switch in early 2019, and there's a fifth numbered entry in development for the Switch at the time of writing.

The games' main helmsman has been Yoshifumi Hashimoto, who has acted as the producer on the franchise, and has also been involved in the *Bokujou Monogatari* games (known in the U.S. as either *Harvest Moon* or *Story of Seasons*, depending on who published them) since 2006. Hashimoto has also contributed writing and design to various games in the series. The games themselves were developed by Neverland, the company behind the *Lufia* series as well as assorted other titles like *CIMA: The Enemy* and *Shining Force Neo*. The music was composed by Tomoko Morita, who has worked on many previous Neverland games. Character design for the franchise was handled by Minako Iwasaki, who has also worked on various manga and light novels, as well as on games in the *Ys* franchise.

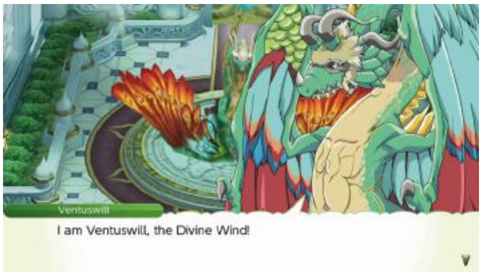


The inaugural entry in the *Rune Factory* franchise debuted in Japan as a celebration of the 10th anniversary of the *Bokujo Monogatari* series. The title was described by Hashimoto as simply "*Bokujo Monogatari* where you wield a sword", and it lives up to that.

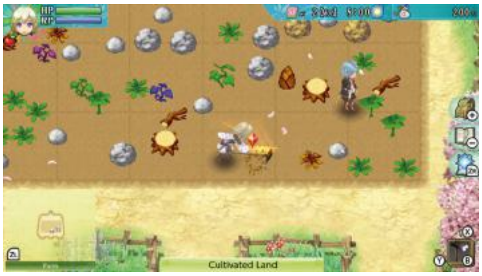
The game is very open-ended, with the player controlling a protagonist, Raguna, who stumbles into a town named Kardia and collapses. After waking, he finds that he has amnesia, and after being nursed back to health by a woman named Mist, he is given the opportunity to live on her land if he helps out on the farm. Raguna accepts, and from there the player can run the farm, explore the village, romance one of several ladies, and explore the caves and fight the monsters within. The storyline is only advanced through exploring the caves, where Raguna can learn more about why monsters attack the town, as well as regain more of his memory.

Rune Factory: Frontier continues the story from the first *Rune Factory* game, with the player once again in control of Raguna. After Mist mysteriously leaves in the middle of the night, Raguna tracks her to the town of Trampoli, above which Whale Island hovers in the sky. Moving into the town, Raguna learns that Whale Island

For those who like the farming and cultivation aspect of *Harvest Moon*, but found its premise a little too pedestrian, *Rune Factory* is there to add a bit of hacking and slashing to it.



I am Ventuswill, the Divine Wind!



Rune Factory 4
NINTENDO 3DS
XSEED

is in danger of falling on the town, and is tasked with restoring the runes inside of it in order to keep it afloat.

Rune Factory 2 and *Rune Factory 3* feature the same premise as the first numbered title, with an amnesiac male protagonist wandering into a town, meeting a pretty young woman, and being tasked with bringing the town's farm back to its former glory and productivity. In *Rune Factory 2*, the player character Kyle is focused on rebuilding the town's school, and upon regaining his memory, he leaves his family in the middle of the night. His child later learns that Kyle went off to seal away the dragon Fiersome, merging himself with the beast to restrain its powers. In *Rune Factory 3*, the protagonist Micah discovers that he's actually half monster, and uses the resulting abilities to help reunite multiple factions, in order to restore peace to the land and help the large Sharance Tree bloom again.

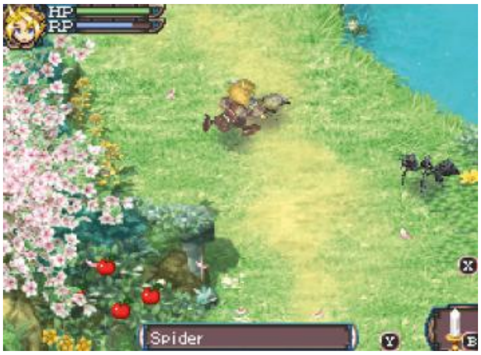
Rune Factory: Tides of Destiny departs from the formula set by the series at this point, giving players the chance to control two main characters, Aden and Sonja. The pair one day wake up to learn they've been cursed: they're now sharing one body, and find themselves on the strange Fenith Island. After getting over their initial confusion, they travel the world on the back of a large creature named Ymir, who can raise sunken ships, as well as islands, from the sea. Some of these islands contain monsters to fight, and mysteries to solve. Aden and Sonja also uncover a plot led by the Masked Man to use the Wind Priestess' body to become a god. Of the *Rune Factory* titles, *Tides of Destiny* has the most RPG elements and by far the heaviest plot, though it maintains the farming gameplay of the other titles.

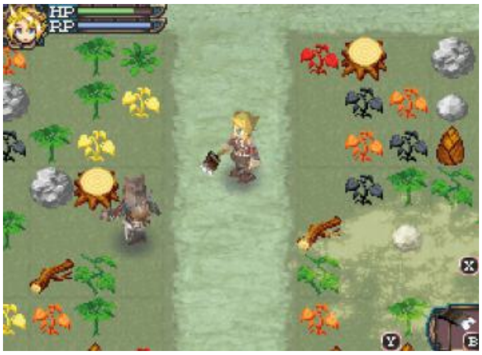
Rune Factory 4 returns to the formula of a main character with amnesia, a condition contracted after they arrive in the town of Selphia by falling out of an airship. The protagonist (who can be either a boy or a girl in this title) is immediately mistaken for a royal personage who was supposed to come to Selphia and help run the town. Though the mistake is uncovered when the actual prince, Arthur, arrives, he is happy to let the player take over his job. From there, the protagonist is tasked with gaining the villagers' trust, helping to attract tourists by adding events to the calendar, and other town-running duties. They also must uncover the dangers lurking in nearby caves and dungeons, with many of the boss monsters reverting to human form once they are defeated, then moving into town.

Unlike the previous games, *Rune Factory 4* runs at 60 frames per second, as Hashimoto wanted to make sure that the farming aspects of the game felt as satisfying as possible – that pulling crops out of the ground would be felt immediately – and to give the player a greater sense of control. The game also focused more strongly on the romance aspect, with Hashimoto wanting the overall theme of the game to be "passionate love". Accordingly, the game features more variety in dating events and in the bachelors and bachelorettes themselves. These additions contributed to the game's success, with *Rune Factory 4* becoming, so far, the best-selling title in the franchise.

This fantasy spin on the typical farm simulation game has been a boon for publisher Marvelous, as the *Rune Factory* titles have generally been received very well – especially in comparison to the *Bokujo Monogatari* games, which have seen more mixed reception as of late.

Originating on portable platforms, the visuals are a little simple, but the character designs radiate charm.





NINTENDO DS
Rune Factory 3

King’s Field (series)

Developer: FromSoftware | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2, PSP, WIN

HP050
MP030

KING'S FIELD

Long before FromSoftware changed the face of RPGs forever with SoulsBorne, it was simply a developer of office software. It wasn’t until 1994, eight years after its founding, that From pivoted towards game development. Their first game, PlayStation launch title *King’s Field*, was a crunchy action RPG that would go come to represent much of their design ethos, from *Echo Night* all the way up to *Sekiro*.

Home consoles had never seen anything like *King’s Field* before. A Japanese take on cult PC hit *Ultima Underworld*, each game is a fully 3D, first-person adventure in which the protagonist is dropped into a hostile world with little guidance, demanding that the player learn through experimentation. The series also persists in exercising its dark sense of humour; each game starts the player in a position from which they can easily careen into the abyss. After that, there’s usually a sword-swinging skeleton hiding behind a door to kill you – a running joke familiar to *Dark Souls* fans. Combat is slow and deliberate; the player must be constantly on the move, ready to strike whenever there’s an opening. This makes each encounter feel a bit like a duel, though control is definitely hampered by the fact that the series pre-dated analogue sticks, requiring mastery of the shoulder buttons to look around. The engine is pretty ill-equipped for boss battles, which devolve into wars of attrition.

The first (Japan-only) game takes place in a five-floor dungeon in which Prince John Forester seeks his missing father. *King’s Field II* (1995) ups the ante, with protagonist Alexander exploring the Island of Melanat, an open world of horrors and puzzles. *King’s Field III* is even larger, as Prince Lyle traverses all of Verdite in search of the Moonlight Sword. It was at this point that the engine began to show its age, simply unable to keep up with Verdite’s vast fields. Finally, there was *King’s Field IV: The Ancient City* for the PS2, which uses the *Eternal Ring* engine. Azalin’s Prince Devian is tasked with returning the Idol of Sorrow to its rightful place within the titular subterranean city. This is *King’s Field* at its best; eye-catching, well-balanced, and utterly captivating.

The series received a number of side games, including *King’s Field Additional* for the PSP, which has more in common with *Wizardry* than with the rest of the series. Most notable is *Shadow Tower*, a duo of spiritual successors for the PS1 and PS2. The first takes the series back to its roots, as the mercenary Ruus descends the cramped and atmospheric tower to free his people. The Japan-only *Shadow Tower Abyss* is a very ambitious SF/Lovecraftian mash-up, with a large cast of characters and the ability to target foes’ individual body parts.

One of the cooler releases is *Sword of Moonlight*, creation software for Windows that allows users to create their own *King’s Field* game. This comes with a high-res remake of the original game as a sample, though the limitations of the software don’t allow for the more complex aspects found in later entries.

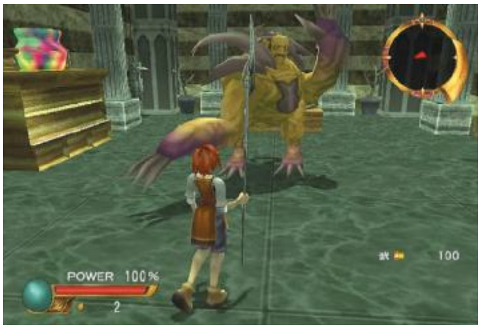
While largely derided as clumsy and antiquated at the time of release, the *King’s Field* series has been re-examined in a more positive light given the popularity of the SoulsBorne games.

Evergrace

Developer: FromSoftware | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS2

With *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*, Japanese studio FromSoftware became a fan-favourite developer. However, that was not previously the case. In the years before their breakthrough hits, quite a few RPG players saw FromSoftware as the kind of company that would rush to new systems simply in order to offer the first RPG-ish titles. And looking at *Evergrace*, it's not hard to see how such an impression might arise. Released within two months of the Japanese hardware launch, the game has a pretty rushed, sloppy feel to it. After choosing between the two playable characters Darius and Sharline, each sporting a different storyline and fighting style, the player finds themselves in the cursed kingdom of Rieubane.

In terms of graphics, *Evergrace* has that typical early-PS2 feel to it. Thanks to 480i resolution, the picture seems crisp, but also shows that giveaway flickering in menus and at the edges of many objects. Outside-areas surprise with warm, autumnal colours but character and monster animation feels rather stiff; battles feel nothing like the fights in FromSoftware's later body of work.



Still, there is an interesting aspect to combat. *Evergrace* offers optional support for the PS2's analogue buttons: the strength of a button-press determines the power of the attack and its stamina consumption. Another relative novelty is the way equipment actually changes the look of the player-character; it also determines the player's stats. A slightly more ambitious prequel, titled *Evergrace II* in Japan and *Forever Kingdom* in the West, was released in 2001.

PlayStation 2
EVER GRACE

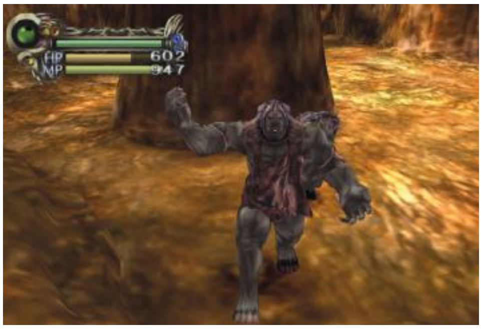
FromSoftware tried something a little different with this early PlayStation 2 RPG series, though it never quite made a mark in the way *King's Field* did.

Eternal Ring

Developer: FromSoftware | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS2

While FromSoftware's *Evergrace* was released only a few weeks after the Japanese launch of the PlayStation 2 in 2000, their first PS2 title, *Eternal Ring,* was out on day one. As Cain Morgan, the player travels to the so-called Island of No Return in order to find a powerful magical ring. In comparison to *King's Field*, the game has a larger emphasis on magic, thanks to the central ring mechanic, and due to a rather limited choice of weapons, mêlée attacks are more of an afterthought. Instead, Cain relies on magical rings that are crafted using basic rings and elemental gems of varying quality – all there to be found across the island. Some of these crafted rings affect the hero's stats, some enable offensive or support actions, some grant passive effects. The ring system is pleasantly complex and essential for success; with ten equipment slots for these rings, the game allows for many different approaches.

After three episodes of *King's Field*, FromSoftware had a good deal of experience with action RPGs played from a first-person view, and the PS2's tech allows for a smoother frame rate and a higher resolution, but the often bland designs don't do the game any favours. Like its cousin *Evergrace*, *Eternal Ring* supports the PS2 controller's analogue buttons for movement and attack power, but the feature feels more gimmicky than useful. The whole game feels rather stiff, especially in cutscenes. FromSoftware made a good call in not making their PS2 debut a part of the *King's Field* series. *Eternal Ring* is not a bad game, but like so many early releases, it just feels rushed and sloppy; it doesn't reach the level of quality later offered by the excellent *King's Field IV*.



PlayStation 2
ETERNAL RING

As one of the first RPGs released on the PlayStation 2, this *King's Field*-adjacent title feels obviously rushed.

SoulsBorne (series)

Developer: FromSoftware | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): PS3, X360, PS4, XB1, WIN, NSW

Back in 2009, FromSoftware, in collaboration with Sony, created *Demon's Souls*, a third-person spiritual successor to its long-running *King's Field* series, with its myriad offshoots. Looking quite unlike the rest of the PlayStation 3's then-small library of RPGs, Sony figured the dark action RPG would have niche appeal at best, and opted not to release it in the West. Oh, how wrong they were.

Ambitious RPG fans sat up and took notice of *Demon's Souls*, which developed such a fervent cult following online that Atlus picked it up for an official US release in October 2009, with Namco Bandai Europe following suit a few months later. Compared to the cinematic action games of the time, that held your hand and did their best to see you through the experience, *Demon's Souls* was damned difficult, asking more of the player in ways that hadn't been seen since the 16-bit days.

In 2011, *Demon's Souls'* own spiritual successor, *Dark Souls*, came out for both PS3 and Xbox 360. With its numerous mysteries and multiplayer mode, *Dark Souls'* online life never really stopped. Multiple sequels, expanded re-releases, and spiritual siblings like *Bloodborne* followed suit, the latter of which takes place in a horror-filled environment inspired by H.P. Lovecraft. And that's not to mention dozens of challengers to the throne developed by other studios across the globe. "Soulslike" came to be a moniker for any game that borrowed its mechanics, like having to revisit the spot where you died to regain lost currency.

As of May 2020, the *Dark Souls* series alone has sold over 27 million units worldwide, and From's own successor, the yet-to-be-released *Elden Ring*, features a scenario co-written by famed fantasy author George R.R. Martin. It's safe to say that SoulsBorne, as it's colloquially referred to by fans, is a phenomenon that's changed the face of video games forever.

Considered to be the brainchild of current From president Hidetaka Miyazaki, previously a director on the *Armored Core* series, SoulsBorne is a series of action RPGs with five core tenets:

1. Learn By Doing. Like *King's Field* before it, SoulsBorne wants you to explore, and it wants you to fail in doing so. Once you exit the brief tutorial zone, you're on your own. Though this can make each SoulsBorne title incredibly difficult, they're also rarely unfair: each adversary clearly telegraphs their moves and leaves themselves open; many attacks can be parried with the correct timing. Unlike in *King's Field*, death isn't a trip back to the last save point: die, and you'll respawn at your last checkpoint, lacking all of your unbanked Souls (experience/currency). Taking inspiration from Rogue-likes, you're given the opportunity to make a Corpse Run to retrieve your lost goodies; die again and they're gone for good. While each SoulsBorne playthrough constantly autosaves, which makes each decision permanent, the chance to retrieve one's corpse hammers home the point that it's OK – indeed encouraged – to screw up.

DARK SOULS
16

The original *Demon's Souls* for the PlayStation 3 was a surprise hit, starting a whole sub-genre of hardcore action RPGs that continues a decade on.

Bloodborne

May you find your worth in the waking world.

The SoulsBorne games, as they're nicknamed, can be quite intimidating, but are also gratifying in a way that other action games aren't.

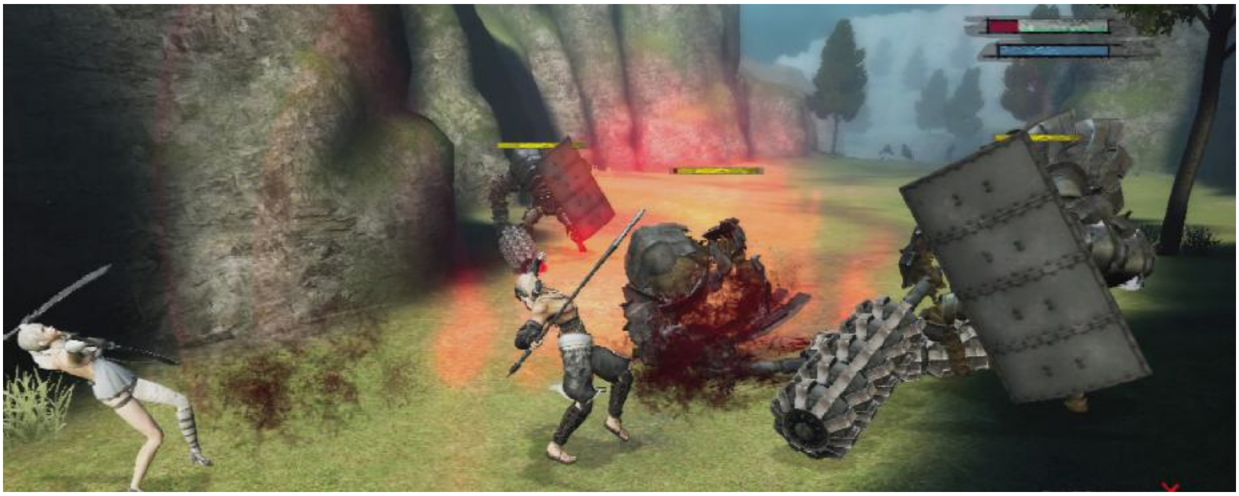
2. Solve the Mystery. SoulsBorne's approach to storytelling is indirect and vague. The bones of the plot are there, though you may not be privy to your role within the world. Cryptic clues are given away by NPCs, and many of the more revealing details are contained within item descriptions. These snippets, if engaged with, position the player as a detective or archaeologist seeking to put together a fuller picture of what happened before they arrived. There's no canonical explanation, either, enticing the player to interpret things as they wish. Miyazaki himself has stated that he longed to create a game with an impact like that of the original *Legend of Zelda*, in which players shared their knowledge through word of mouth, and attempted to solve mysteries together. Judging by the numerous forums, wikis, and fan communities that have sprung up around SoulsBorne, he apparently succeeded.

3. Engage in Jolly Cooperation. With the exception of 2019's *Sekiro* (another action game from FromSoftware that has far fewer RPG characteristics than its siblings), each SoulsBorne title encourages players to engage with each other online. They can summon help against a particularly challenging boss from a friend or a charitable stranger, or they can opt to be summoned to help another player in turn. And that's to say nothing of the Player vs. Player systems, in which a more mischievous player can invade another's world; whoever kills who receives a big bonus, bragging rights, and possibly a nasty message from a less mature player.

4. Don't Give Up. From its gigantic, screeching bosses, to its precarious walks across narrow ledges, SoulsBorne relishes overwhelming the player. Again, as per the first tenet, SoulsBorne is rarely unfair. Clear your mind and face your foe with calm determination. That said, there's no shame in doing what you have to do to win. Unless you're specifically using an external cheat engine, there's no such thing as cheating within SoulsBorne. Trap a foe behind a door and go to town on it; plink at a dragon's tail at a distance; watch a video tutorial or summon another player to figure out how to beat that flying centipede boss; or even just grind up a few extra levels. If you still find yourself beating your head against the same fight with no progress, you can usually go challenge another area and come back later. Or you can just stop for the night, and come back in the morning with a fresh set of nerves. Stick with it, play how you want to play, and don't beat yourself up, and SoulsBorne is an immensely satisfying experience.

5. Fashion it Up. Each weapon, shield, and piece of armour or clothing, from hats to boots, has not only its own characteristics but also its own unique appearance. Is there a nun's habit you think you'd look especially fetching in? Give it a go – it just might boast a high poison resistance. No poison around? That's OK too – "Fashion Souls" are part of the appeal of the series as a whole. With so much equipment to find, there are endless combinations of outfits available. You're going to want to look your best when invading another player's world, after all.

A question commonly argued over is: can SoulsBorne be classified as a JRPG? The answer is a resounding yes. Though each title may bear the trappings of Western fantasy, it's interpreted through a distinctly Eastern lens, with an approach to side quests and secrets found more often in Japanese games. The JRPG is a broad category that's seen constant evolution since its advent. *Dark Souls* may have little in common with *Final Fantasy*, in the same way that *Final Fantasy* has little in common with *Wizardry*. FromSoft took disparate elements from both East and West; particularly Steve Jackson's *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks, and Kentaro Miura's epic manga *Berserk*, to create something new and enticing.



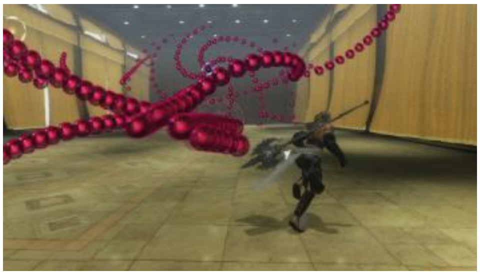
Nier

Developer: Square Enix/Cavia | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): PS3, X360, PS4, WIN

Nier begins with the game's hero (named by the player, but known affectionately as Papa Nier among fans) fighting off shadowy monsters in what appears to be a modern-day city. The story then jumps forward over 1,300 years, and civilization has seemingly gone through some kind of apocalypse and reverted back to a medieval state, though Nier himself seems unchanged. He is, however, gravely concerned about his sick daughter Yonah, who is suffering from a terminal illness. As he seeks a way to cure her, he investigates the mysteries surrounding the world, how it came to be, and his role in it.

This action RPG was directed by Yoko Taro, who was previously known for Square's PS2 action game *Drakengard*; a game which, by most accounts, was dreadful to play but had a darkly compelling storyline. *Nier*, also developed by Cavia, isn't quite as bad, though its strengths don't really lie in its visuals or its gameplay. The budget clearly wasn't very large, because much of the landscape is fairly ugly (though there are some bits of attractive art design) and the combat, while not awful, is rather basic and repetitive. The middling visuals are in contrast to the brilliantly evocative soundtrack, accompanied by gorgeous vocals in a fictional language. While the camera primarily stays behind the hero, it often switches positions, giving overhead, isometric, and even side-view perspectives of the action and platforming, making it feel dynamic; one section even turns into a straight-up visual novel. Boss fights are innovative too, with elaborate bullet patterns that feel like they're out of an arcade shoot-'em-up.

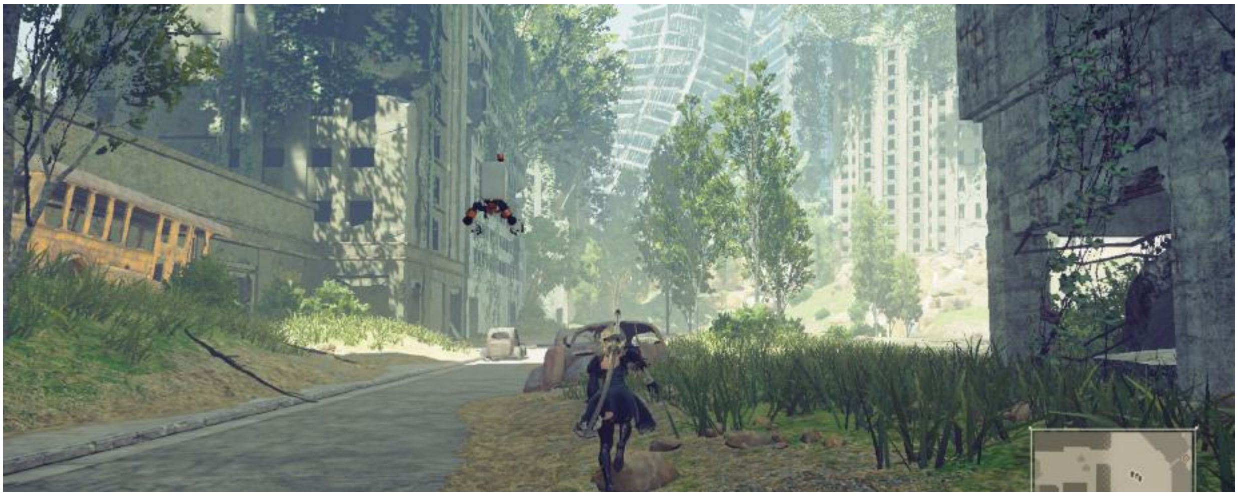
But again, *Nier*'s appeal really lies with its story, and perhaps more importantly, its characters. The hero is joined by an eccentric bunch, including Grimoire Weiss, a wise-cracking talking book; Kainé, a scantily clad woman with a foul mouth; and Emil, a child already suffering an unfortunate fate, who is later cursed with a terrifying appearance. The fantastic localisation and voice acting turn these into some of the most memorable characters seen in a Japanese RPG, making it easy to empathise with their struggles. The game is meant to be played a few times, and culminates in four different ways. It is fairly repetitive, though subsequent plays are much quicker than the initial run (early parts of the story are skipped, too), plus you're given a new perspective on old events that drastically reshapes the narrative.



In Japan, there were two releases with different protagonists: *Nier Replicant*, the PS3 version, starring a teenage hero and casting Yonah as his sister, and *Nier Gestalt* for the Xbox 360, with the older Nier, which was released on both platforms internationally. This was created for Western markets, who the developers felt preferred older protagonists … and they're kind of right, considering how routine teenagers are in JRPGs. Plus, the old man Nier preceded a number of "dad" games, like *The Last of Us* and *God of War* (2018), focusing on the relationship between a man and his child. In 2020, a remake was announced, based on *Nier Replicant*, which will allow the English market to experience the game as it was intended.

XBOX 360
LIVE
NIER

While critic reviews were middling, the offbeat characters, excellent story, and fantastic localisation quickly earned *Nier* the affection of many JRPG fans.



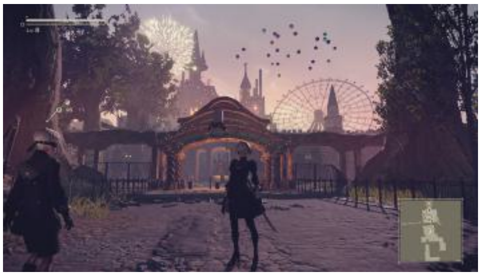
Nier Automata

Developer: Square Enix/PlatinumGames | Released: 2017 | Platform(s): PS4, XB1, WIN

Nier Automata takes place long after the events of *Nier*. The Earth has come under attack from aliens, causing humans to flee to the moon. To fight in their stead and take back the planet, the humans develop an android army called YoRHa, members of which make regular journeys down to the surface of the planet and fight against the robots left by the aliens. The protagonist, at least at the outset, is 2B, a YoRHa android with short white hair, a Gothic Lolita outfit and one sharp sword; while she is stoic and emotionless, she's joined by 9S, a slightly more upbeat male counterpart. The main hub area consists of a ruined city that's been reclaimed by nature, but there are a few others areas of note, particularly a creepy amusement park.

Cavia had gone out of business by this point, so development shifted to PlatinumGames, the folks behind such character action hits as *Bayonetta* and *Metal Gear Rising*. The original *Nier* was, at best, functional when it came to combat, but this sequel is orders of magnitude more satisfying when it comes to pretty much everything, particularly its visuals and frame rate. However, it is still meant for RPG players, so the difficulty isn't nearly as demanding as more purely action-focused games. Though equipped with a sword by default, there are other weapons to find too, mecha that floats around your shoulders and fires bullets. Characters are also customisable by slotting in chips. The action still routinely shifts perspective, and there are now regular scenes in which your androids hop into a floating mecha for some shoot-'em-up sequences.

Though the robots are often your enemies, there's something oddly adorable about them, and you do come across a faction that want only to live in peace. One of the main themes of the game is the independent evolution of artificial life forms like androids and robots, outside of their pre-determined programming. This can even be heard in the sometimes-trivial radio banter from the YoRHa headquarters, complaining about office romances in-between giving mission orders. As with *Nier*, the game delves into themes that are presented in sci-fi literature but not often discussed in video games, which is what makes them special.

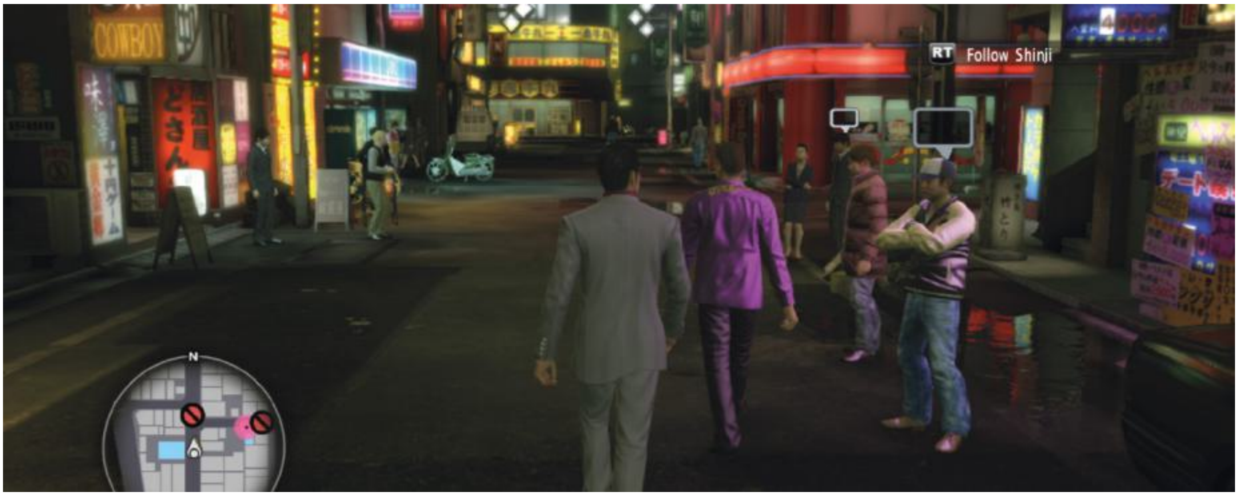


In most ways, *Automata* is a huge improvement, though its main cast, however strikingly designed, never really has anyone as off-the-wall as Weiss or Kainé. The game also uses a multi-ending structure, casting you first as 2B, then later as 9S, whose adventure is largely identical, though he also has the ability to hack robots via small mini-games. Then the story resumes, with a few more branches to come. There's also an assortment of bad ends you can trigger, some very simple, such as removing your CPU from your chip bank, effectively committing suicide.

While *Nier*'s issues relegated it to the status of cult classic, *Nier Automata* is so much better put together that it quickly found surprise success, topping four million units, spawning both the mobile spinoff *Nier: Reincarnation*, and triggering a remaster of the first game.

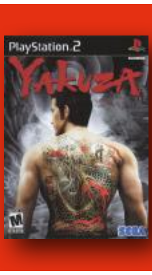
PS4
NieR:Automata
SQUARE ENIX

The first *Nier* had trouble figuring out which protagonist would most appeal in each territory. Its sequel creates a protagonist everyone can love – a white-haired, sword-wielding Gothic Lolita android.



Yakuza (series)

Developer: SEGA | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): PS2, PS3, PSP, PS4, WIN, IOS, AND, MOB



The *Yakuza* or *Ryu ga Gotoku* ("Like A Dragon") series has a rather infamous origin, with franchise head Toshihiro Nagoshi threatening to leave SEGA unless they let him pursue his idea for a more accessible game for adults, exploring subject matter games hadn't really addressed before. The end result is a game series in the double digits with a yearly release schedule, every entry selling like hotcakes in its Japanese homeland. *Yakuza* is also a spiritual successor to *Shenmue*, though it sacrifices that series' focus on capturing a particular time and place for the sake of realism to make a more traditionally entertaining experience, though with similar levels of world detail and complexity.

It took quite a long time to take off outside of its homeland, though. The first game for the PlayStation 2 was released with some curious English dubbing, but also marketing that seemed to position it as the Japanese counterpart to *Grand Theft Auto*, even though it isn't. The rest of the mainline games were released with native Japanese voice acting and subtitles, though some were compromised in some way: some mini-games were cut from *Yakuza 3*, and *Yakuza 5* was released only as a digital download. The series didn't truly pick up in the West until *Yakuza 0* for the PlayStation 4, the marketing for which managed to successfully sell its unique sense of humour.

The main numbered games follow Kazuma Kiryu, a yakuza known as the Dragon of Dojima, who keeps ending up in the Tokyo red-light district of Kamurocho (based on the real-life Kabukicho) having to solve problems for the Tojo clan, even after he's left. Kiryu's story is told in depth over years, showing him age along with his world, and exploring different parts of his life; even the prequel, *Yakuza 0*, shows how he first joined the Tojo. There's a sincerity to the franchise that few other games have ever managed, with cinematic cutscenes having extensive and effective dialogue, along with actual actor likenesses in later games.

This is all in contrast with the extremely goofy tone during gameplay, including the side stories equivalent to the optional side quests you'd see in a JRPG. You get to help a dominatrix understand what masochist men like, or give a pep-talk to a part-time pocket-car-track worker, telling him there's no shame in still being a virgin. And that's just some of the minor stories from *Yakuza 0*!

The series has always had a great balance between silly and serious, partly because those two elements clash so much and show wildly different sides of the main characters. This extends to the combat system, a beat-'em-up-style action brawler in which you can build up a heat meter to enable hotter moves. With the addition of weapons, which you can keep on your person or grab on the street, you can do such ridiculous things as bowl down a bunch of thugs with a bowling ball, or brutal stuff like rip out someone's tooth. They're fine after. The violence is extremely exaggerated and cartoony, even in the original PS2 games.

The series may not be a "Japanese RPG" in the traditional sense of the term, but it's most

SEGA didn't know how to market the original *Yakuza* in North America, so it ended up being advertised as a Japanese *Grand Theft Auto*. It's not, and it took quite a while before they could successfully sell its particular charm to English-speaking audiences.

***Yakuza 0* is where the series really took off internationally, especially since it was a prequel, so players unfamiliar with the other games could jump right in.**

definitely inspired by them. The main JRPG element of the series has always been the ability to level up your character over time to unlock more moves, buffs, and higher stats, with some added flair – getting drunk gives you an attack power buff, for example. Later games even have proper skill trees, *Yakuza 0* switches from an experience system for using money, in its '80s boom environment, to unlock more branches on the tree. You can even equip not just weapons, but accessories and defensive items as well; *Yakuza 3* lets you equip multiple weapons you can switch through with a button press. There are even random battles, though they occur as punks run up to you in the streets, as opposed to the screen just swirling or breaking apart.

You can also just explore the neighbourhoods, all re-creations of actual spots in Japan, and spend time on side activities like crane games and batting cages. There are even entire arcades with actual SEGA games, including a playable arcade version of *Virtua Fighter 5* in *Judgment*, a recent spinoff about a former defence laywer. The brilliant thing is that these games deliberately prevent you from causing chaos in the streets, making you engage with and take in the city, instead of turning it into a toy box (though *Yakuza 6* started to move away from this a bit, with the Dragon Engine's focus on physics objects and seamless transition from exploration to fighting).

There are also two games set in historical periods, *Kenzan* in the Edo period and *Ishin* in the Bakumatsu period, though both are Japanese exclusives (though SEGA has expressed interest in translating and porting *Ishin*). They each re-imagine the *Yakuza* cast in new scenarios, some more questionable than others (especially Kiryu's adopted daughter Haruka in *Kenzan*). More focus is also placed on sword fights.

The Japanese-only *Kurohyou* ("Black Panther") spinoff series on PSP has a street-fighting theme and managed to net a televised drama adaptation, the series wrapping up by the second game. It was, weirdly, made by AKI developers, known mostly for *Def Jam* and assorted wrestling games. While the *Yakuza* games were still sparse in the West, we did get a spinoff called *Yakuza: Dead Souls* that almost nobody liked. The game was a what-if zombie game based around gunplay, which *Yakuza* has never been good at, though it did bring back fan favourite Ryuji Goda from *Yakuza 2*.

The PS2 *Yakuza* games were remade as *Yakuza Kiwami* and *Yakuza Kiwami 2*, using systems from later releases and reworking a few details, like *2*'s ultimate villain being recast, and an additional prequel in *Kiwami 2* for Goro Majima, a fan favourite character who was playable in *Yakuza 0*. The second game was better received than the first, which includes a bizarre mechanic whereby bosses can turtle up to regain health and power up, not to mention locking combat skills behind repetitive fights. A *Fist of the North Star* spinoff called *Lost Paradise* was also made, taking that franchise and putting it in a *Yakuza* framework. There's a mobile and PC game out there as well, called *Ryu ga Gotoku Online*, which was mainly made to show off the protagonist Ichiban Kasuga, of *Yakuza: Like A Dragon* (*Ryu ga Gotoku 7: Hikari to Yami no Yukue*).

This latest *Yakuza* game marks the first time in the franchise's history that the main series has made a major change. Inspired by the likes of *Dragon Quest*, this new game is set to play like a traditional turn-based JRPG, justified by Kasuga being a huge nerd who sees the world in those terms. It's even complete with ridiculous summons, like a swarm of crawfish. While the franchise is changing its base mechanics significantly, the presentation and writing are as weirdly engaging as ever. What's going to be interesting is seeing how the developers handle designing these games as more traditional JRPGs, rather than the experimental combinations they've been so far.

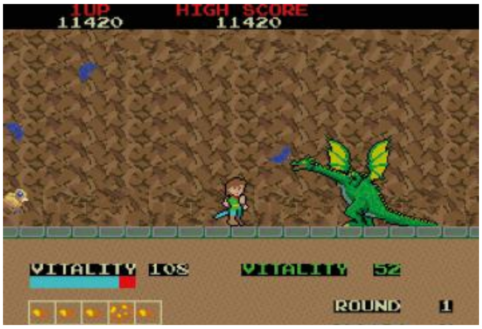
Dragon Buster

Developer: Namco | Released: 1985 | Platform(s): ARC, FC, PC88, PC98, MSX, X68

Namco was a pioneer of both arcade role-playing, with 1984's *The Tower of Druaga*, and side-scrolling platforming, with 1984's *Pac-Land*. The two genres collided in *Dragon Buster*, an early action RPG. As the hero Clovis, you must venture through the kingdom and explore caves, towers, and other locales in order to rescue the princess Celia.

While action RPGs, like Falcom's *Dragon Slayer*, did exist on computers around this time, they were long and obscure. *Dragon Buster*, in contrast, is an arcade game, so it needs to be easy to understand – you just barrel forwards and beat up bad guys. Each level has various rooms, connected by weaving corridors. Typically, once you enter a room, you'll be trapped inside until you beat the enemy. The levels, however, grow a little more complex as you get further into the game. Each stage also has an overworld map that lets you choose which levels to enter. Compared to modern RPGs, the role-playing elements are minimal, beyond perhaps using a number to indicate vitality, or the many magical spells or items you can find, but it is one of the first games to use fantasy RPG trappings in an arcade setting. It's also the first game to feature a double jump. The Famicom port adds in some extra items, as well as an experience system that enhances your life meter when your score increases.

Dragon Buster II is Famicom-only and takes place from an overhead perspective; it's basically a totally different game. Namco later created a spiritual successor to the first game for the PlayStation, called *Dragon Valor*, which is a side-scrolling 3D beat-'em-up, which also has some light RPG elements, as you can use gold to purchase items and equipment.



namcot
ドラゴンバスター
Dragon Buster

Namco often pays tribute to its classic arcade games. In the PS2/3DS RPG *Tales of the Abyss*, there's actually a whole mini-game based on *Dragon Buster*.

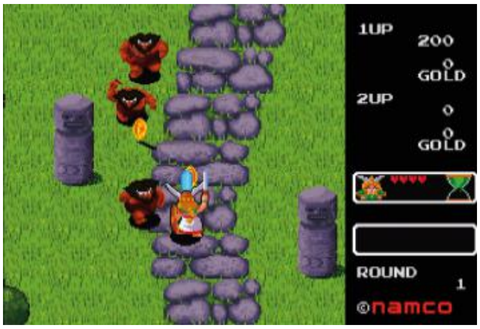
The Legend of Valkyrie

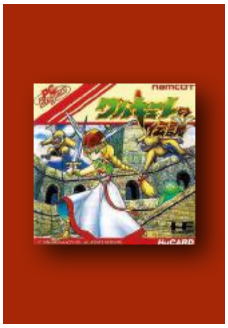
Developer: Namco | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): ARC, PCE, PS1

Namco's *Valkyrie* series was born as a frustratingly difficult action RPG for the Famicom, *Valkyrie no Bouken* (see page 470), but received a drastically reworked sequel released for the arcades, *Valkyrie no Densetsu* ("The Legend of Valkyrie"). Again, you control a warrior maiden, sent down from the heavens to protect the humans on Earth from evil, this time in the form of an evil magician named Kamooz. The genre has changed to an overhead run-and-gun, similar to *Commando* or *Ikari Warriors*, though with a brighter, fantasy bent.

Despite the shift in focus, it still maintains some core RPG elements, and in a way, it resembles SEGA/Westone's earlier *Wonder Boy in Monster Land* (see page 449). Defeated enemies drop coins, which can be used to buy extra weapons from shopkeepers. Valkyrie also has access to a number of magic spells, though they aren't given to you straight away, and usually require a bit of extra exploration or questing to find. Since the game is still pretty linear, if you miss something, it's gone unless you restart. It supports two players, playing as Valkyrie and her buddy Xandra, who later got his own spinoff action game for the SNES, called *Xandra no Daibouken* in Japan and known in Europe as *Whirlo*.

Valkyrie no Densetsu, at least in its initial form, was one of the many Namco arcade games of the era which never made it outside of Japan. A PC Engine port expanded some elements, such as implementing an experience system, but the visuals aren't quite as pretty. The game eventually saw English release in 1997 as one of the titles on the *Namco Museum Vol. 5* for the PlayStation.





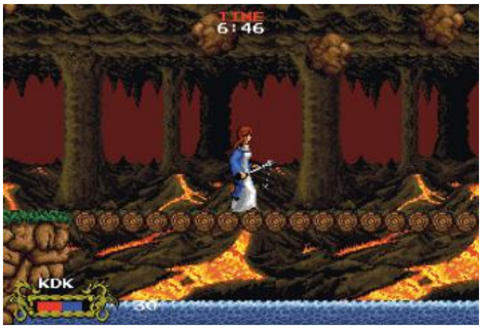
Valkyrie is one of Namco's more popular retro characters, popping up in crossover games like *Project X Zone*, even though there are only a few games in the actual franchise.

Cadash

Developer: Taito | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): ARC, GEN, TG16

Atari's 1985 arcade classic *Gauntlet* let four players each pick one of four character types, and sent them on a quest to kill tons and tons of bad guys. It's not a video game RPG in the purest sense, at least compared to computer games like *Ultima* or *Wizardry*, but it has the same window dressing, and the same camaraderie, as tabletop RPGs, in that you and some buds were banding together for an adventure.

That same spirit can be seen in Taito's arcade game *Cadash*, though the influence from console RPGs of the time can be seen more readily. As with *Gauntlet*, you pick from four characters – Fighter, Priest, Ninja, and Magician – as you save a princess, all in a medieval setting. It's actually a bit similar to *Rastan*, another Taito game from a few years earlier, but with RPG trappings and supporting four players, using networked cabinets. If you stand still for a few moments, a status window pops up that shows your stats. Kill enough enemies and you'll gain a level and raise those stats; between levels you'll visit towns where you can buy new equipment or stock up on curatives. Being an arcade game, it's mostly linear, though some later levels get a little more complex, even having a time limit to prevent too much dawdling.



TURBOGRAFX
CADASH

It's hard to say how popular the arcade game was, but *Cadash* probably got more exposure from its two 16-bit console ports – a TurboGrafx-16 version, which was solid but had simplified levels (and an improved localisation by Working Designs), and a Genesis version, which was mostly more faithful but excised two of the four character classes. Due to console restrictions, both support only two players rather than four.

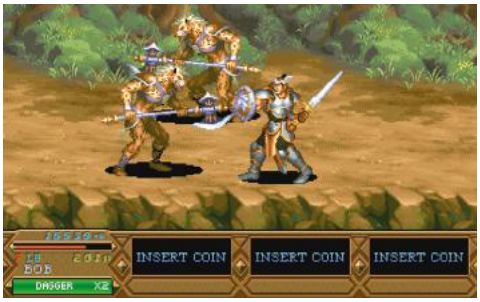
Despite the emphasis on narrative – there are actual NPCs to talk to and towns to visit – Taito didn't have the best grasp of English, so the text in certain arcade versions of *Cadash* is hilariously inept.

Dungeons and Dragons

Developer: Capcom | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): ARC, SAT, PS3, X360, WIN, WIIU

Capcom created a number of RPG-like arcade games similar to *Cadash*, like *Magic Sword*, in which you control one of four character types as they scale a gigantic tower, and *King of Dragons*, a spiritual successor that reformed the game in the style of their popular beat-'em-ups. It was achingly clear that they wanted to make a *Dungeons and Dragons* game, and they finally got the opportunity with two more beat-'em-ups, subtitled *Tower of Doom* and *Shadow over Mystara*.

At the outset, you choose your character, name them, and set off for adventure. You don't gain points, but rather experience, which will increase your max HP when it gets high enough. You have an inventory, and you can cycle between various items and spells, most used in attack, like throwing axes or oil bombs, though some do healing. Shops pop up between stages, so you can use collected gold to purchase more items. The narrative is written in the second person, and you come across various NPCs that may beg you for your help. There are branching paths, sending you to different levels depending on how you answer them. You also run into famous *D&D* monsters like owlbears and the Beholder. *Tower of Doom* has four characters: Fighter, Elf, Cleric, and Dwarf; *Shadow over Mystara* adds two more: the Thief and the Magic User.



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS
CHRONICLES OF MYSTARA

These were ported together to the Japanese Saturn, though the 2013 release *Chronicles of Mystara*, released for numerous platforms, is available internationally. Artist George Kamitani also worked on the graphics for these games; later he founded Vanillaware and published *Dragon's Crown*, in 2013, a lavishly-drawn beat-'em-up using fantasy tropes and featuring RPG elements.

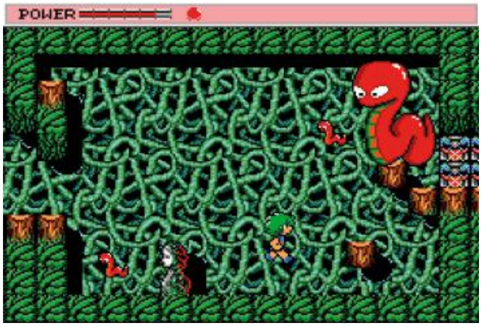
Given how richly detailed these games are, it's no wonder that both *Dungeons and Dragons* games are considered to be among the best of Capcom's beat-'em-ups.

Golvellius: Valley of Doom

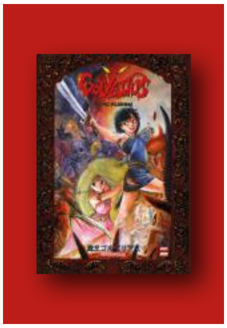
Developer: Compile | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): MSX, MSX2, SMS

Golvellius was part of an early wave of action-adventure games patterned after *The Legend of Zelda,* and it's one of the better ones. As green-haired warrior hero Kelesis, you explore the Valley of Doom in order to rescue the princess from the demon lord named in the title. It's more structured than *Zelda,* with seven discrete zones, and you need to find and defeat each boss before you can move onto the next. Each screen has a hidden cave, usually triggered by defeating enough enemies or hitting the right block, which can reveal shops and other goodies.

Compared to the puzzle dungeons of *Zelda, Golvellius* is more arcade-style, alternating between side-scrolling action sequences and overhead auto-scrolling levels. The downside here is that both types of area have dead ends, and if you get caught in one, you need to start the whole stage over. They aren't very long, though, so it's not a huge issue. As you progress through the game, you get boots that can walk over water, and then over basically every other type of terrain. It looks more like a glitch when you're just kinda passing over seas and forests and stuff, though.



The game began on the MSX, developed by Compile programmer Satoshi Fujishima. A second release was made for the SEGA Master System, which improves the graphics and completely changes the level designs; this is the best-known version, since it was released internationally. A third version, called *Shin Golvellius,* for the MSX2, redoes the layouts again. Though a sequel was never made, a comical food-themed spinoff called *Super Cooks* appeared on Compile's Disk Station, a monthly anthology disk.

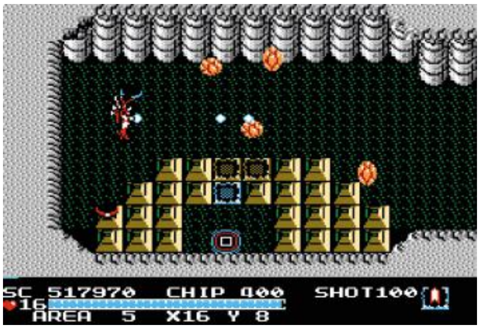


***Golvellius* and *Ys: Vanished Omens* were the first two games on the SEGA Master System to challenge *The Legend of Zelda* on the NES. This one is the better of the two.**

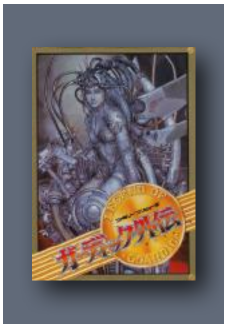
The Guardian Legend

Developer: Compile | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): NES

Compile was a prolific company throughout its decade and a half life span, and outside of their *Puyo Puyo* series, it was known for shoot-'em-ups like *Zanac, Power Strike,* and *MUSHA. The Guardian Legend* is basically a mash-up of *The Legend of Zelda* and one of their shoot-'em-ups. You control a transforming combat android named System DP, aiming to infiltrate a planet called Naju, which is hurtling towards Earth, and must be destroyed by detonating ten explosives found within its mazes. The exploration sections are a bit like the company's earlier action RPG *Golvellius,* as you hunt through mazes, look for weapons and hunt for Corridors. Here, System DP will change into a spaceship, as these levels are presented as vertical shoot-'em-up sections. There are a dozen weapons, mostly projectile based, and all work the same way, regardless of which part of the game you're in. You also have a health bar, rather unusual for a shooter, though the difficulty level would be incredibly high if you died after only a single hit. This bar is extended by increasing your score, which functions as an experience gauge. You also need to find chips in order to power your arsenal of weapons.



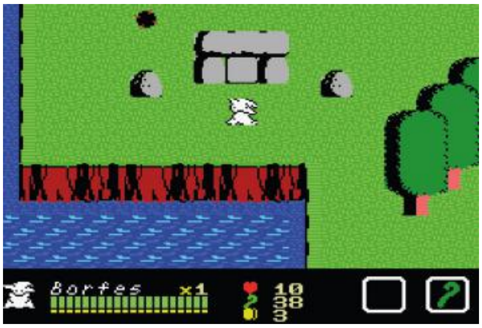
The game world is fairly large, and there's a large number of shooter segments too, many of which are optional. Obviously, given the small 128 kb ROM size, there's quite a bit of repetition. But there's so much to explore, and the central concept is so compelling, that its strengths easily overwhelm its faults, creating one of the most compelling cult classics on the NES. In Japan, the game is called *Guardic Gaiden,* being a spinoff of an earlier MSX game called *Guardic,* though it has little to do with that title.



The cover art for the Famicom version was provided by sci-fi artist Naoyuki Kato. The overseas versions were not so elaborate.

Borfes to 5-nin no Akuma

Developer: XtalSoft | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): MSX



Borfes to 5-nin no Akuma ("Borfes and the Five Demons") stars an apprentice magician who begins a quest to become a real wizard. It obviously takes some inspiration from *The Legend of Zelda,* but while it borrows the basic framework, the details are completely different. There are dungeons, sure, but there's very little in the way of puzzles, beyond figuring out the rock configurations that open up each door. Instead, these caverns act as tunnels that link together a massive overworld, broken up into three main continents – consisting of a forest, a desert, and a land filled with ice and snow – with the latter being home to Nyquis Castle, where you will confront the great wizard demon Naikin Aikis.

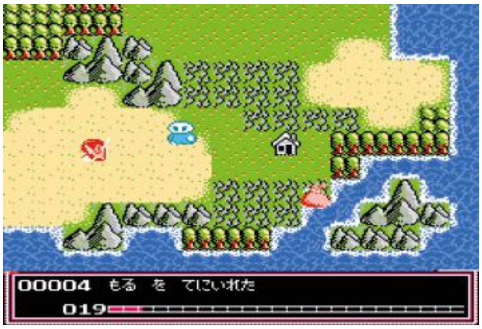
Incidentally, four of the five demons mentioned in the title are actually good guys. During the course of your adventure, they'll join your quest, and you can summon and control them at any time – they even pop into play with cool little animations. In addition to different abilities, they also have skills you'll need to proceed. Borfes can also wield a variety of weapons and magic, and in addition to grabbing gold, gains experience points to expand his health.

The game was designed by Kazunari Tomi, also known as the creator of the *Mugen no Shinzou* games for XtalSoft, who eventually went on to helm the *Lunar* series. While his RPGs were rarely original, they were all very cognisant of genre conventions, and were able to mix and match the best parts of other games to great effect. This one was only available for the MSX computer in ROM format, owing to its obscurity even among Japanese RPG fans.

While not particularly well known, *Borfes* is a fairly decent *Zelda*-alike.

Silviana

Developer: Pack-In-Video | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): FDS, MSX2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Developed by Pack-In-Video, *Silviana* (also spelled *Sylviana*) is an action RPG similar to *Hydlide.* This time you take on the role of a young girl, who sets off to find a cure for her sick mother by hunting for eight treasures.

As in *Hydlide,* there is no attack button, so you bump into enemies to attack, then you exchange blows automatically, based on your strengths. There are no experience levels, though you can purchase upgraded swords and shields, and find hearts to expand your health meter. In the early parts of the game, you'll also be buying lots of bread from the shops, which you can munch on to restore health. As with many games of this era, much time is spent grinding enemies, gaining gold, and returning to towns to heal yourself and replenish curative items. Eventually, you do get the ability to regain health by standing still in the overworld, which greatly improves the pace. You can also create temporary saves almost anywhere, which reduces the frustration.

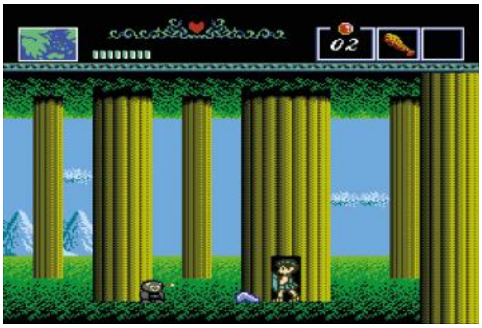
There are many dungeons, and with them boss battles, but they're just simple mazes, and there's little variation between them. About halfway through the game, you enter a dark, mirrored version of the overworld, foreshadowing *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past,* though here it seems like a means of reducing the workload of the map developers. Overall, it's better than other Famicom ARPGs like *Märchen Veil* or *Hydlide,* but it's too simple to have any lasting appeal.

Pack-In-Video also published *Silviana* on the MSX2, about a year after the FDS release. This version has an introductory cinematic sequence, along with more illustrations of the game's cute heroine.

This game's characters also reappear in East Technology's 1991 *Bomberman*-like arcade game *Selfeena,* which was designed by the same planner as *Silviana.*

The Battle of Olympus

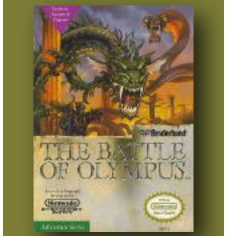
Developer: Infinity | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): NES, GB



In *The Battle of Olympus*, you play as Orpheus, who is tasked with making his way into the underworld to save his love, Helene. Games based on Greek mythology were somewhat uncommon during this era – there was Nintendo's *Kid Icarus*, of course, but that played fast and loose with the subject matter, whereas this game at least tries to stay close to the myth. During your adventures, you meet up with various gods as you travel through Greece, and eventually face off against Hades.

The Battle of Olympus is very heavily based on *Zelda II*, at least from a visual perspective. Orpheus looks like a Link sprite edit, and various aspects, like the house interiors, are almost identical. Even the final battle, in which you fight a shadow, is based on Nintendo's game, though in practice it plays a little differently. But it's not quite an exact duplicate, primarily because there's no overhead map, and the entire game is displayed from a side-view perspective. This proves to be a little troublesome, since you need to map which doors to lead to which areas. There are no experience points, but you do find olives and salamander skins with which to buy new equipment.

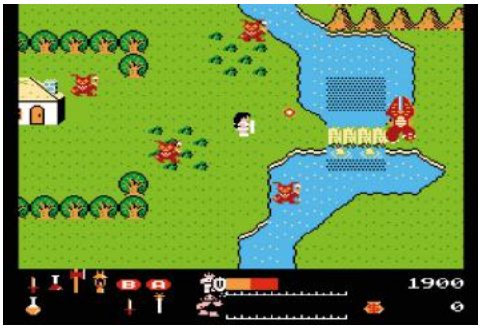
Zelda II is also renowned for its difficulty, but *The Battle of Olympus* is much, much harder. The Orpheus of Greek legend was a poet rather than a fighter, and this is translated faithfully into the game, so he's absolutely terrible at combat. Among the first enemies you meet are bouncing slimes, which are incredibly difficult to hit with your club. Later, projectile-based weapons make things easier, but not by much. If you can manage the frustration, it's not a bad title, but it takes a lot of patience.



Brøderbund brought a number of these early action RPGs to North America, including *The Guardian Legend* and *Legacy of the Wizard.*

Valkyrie no Bouken

Developer: Namco | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): FC



Valkyrie no Bouken ("The Adventure of Valkyrie") was Namco's early attempt at creating an action RPG. The story takes place in a country called Marvel Land, which has been taken over by the dark lord Zouna. The heavens seek to set things right, so the warrior maiden Valkyrie is sent down to save the land.

At the outset, you choose a zodiac symbol as well as a blood type, which affects your strength, magic, and experience growth rates. There's no real guidance, but ultimately you need to hunt for various pieces of equipment that help you find and take down Zouna. The world is broken up into a few continents, most of which can be reached by using teleport blocks, sailing on a ship (which can be carried in your inventory), or riding a whale.

There are significant issues, some typical of mid-'80s RPGs, but others unique to the game. Enemies spawn semi-regularly, almost always surrounding and overwhelming your character. Combat is frustrating, since your sword is tiny and magic is limited. You can grind for gold and experience points, but it doesn't really seem to make much of a difference until you get more powerful equipment. One of the most infuriating parts is when you need to repeatedly beat difficult foes called Xandras, until they randomly drop an item you need. If you lose that item, you need to do it again.

This is a frustrating, hateful game, but Namco revisited the character with the 1989 action arcade game *Valkyrie no Densetsu* ("The Legend of Valkyrie") (see page 466). In 1999, Namco remade *Valkyrie no Bouken* in the style of this sequel, for the PlayStation *Namco Anthology Vol. 2.*

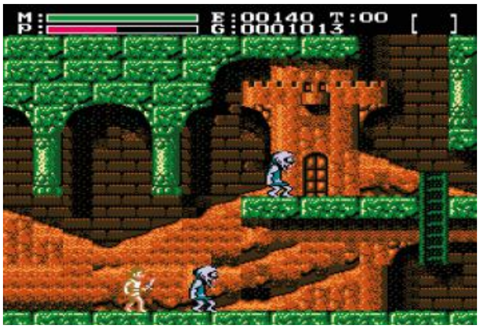
The damsel-in-distress Ki from *The Tower of Druaga* proved so popular that Namco created a number of games starring women, including the warrior maiden Valkyrie of this game.

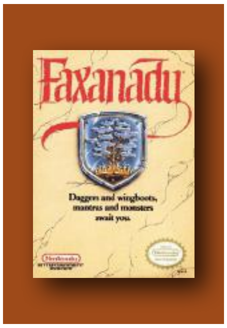
Faxanadu

Developer: Hudson | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): NES

Falcom signed a deal with Hudson to port its hit PC game *Xanadu* to the Famicom. However, the end result, *Faxanadu* (Famicom + *Xanadu*) is basically nothing like the original game. You control an adventurer who returns to his hometown, only to find it in ruins. The nearby World Tree has been devastated, and you are the only remaining warrior who can save it.

When Nintendo released *Faxanadu* in the West, it was positioned as a follow-up to the *Zelda* series, complete with a shield on the cover. Indeed, it does resemble *Zelda II* in a lot of ways, as it's a side-scrolling action RPG in which the player must explore towns, kill enemies for gold and experience, and find equipment to clear barriers. However, there is no overhead map or any random battles. The combat at the outset is pretty clumsy, as your weapon is far too short, but you eventually get better ones, as well as magic spells for attacking from a distance. The character's sprite also changes, depending on their equipment, which was a novelty during this era of RPGs. There are no save games, but instead you get passwords, referred to here as Mantras.





While the levels occasionally require a bit of exploration, you're rarely liable to get lost. The graphics aren't exactly attractive, considering the overly brown colour palette, but there are very few games that take place almost entirely inside of a gigantic tree. Overall, it's not a patch on the *Zelda* games, but it's certainly a game more suited to the 8-bit console market than the obscure *Xanadu*. Falcom later dipped its toes into the Famicom market with *Legacy of the Wizard*, which is more faithful to *Xanadu* in spirit.

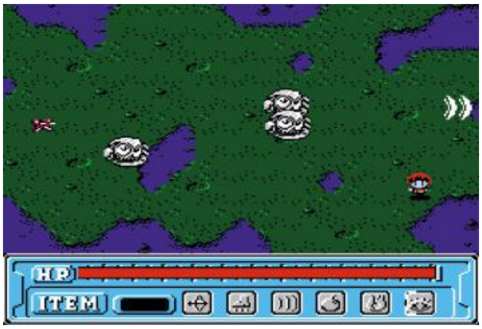
Reportedly, Hudson did not have the source code for *Xanadu*, and due to both time and technical constraints, elected to create their own game rather than port it.

Faria

Developer: Game Arts | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): NES

In *Faria*, you control an unnamed female warrior, as she sets off on a quest to rescue the princess of the kingdom. Much of the game is handled like *Dragon Quest*, in that you explore a large overworld map, except that when you enter combat, the screen zooms up close and play changes to action-based combat, as in the original *Legend of Zelda*. Beyond your sword, you can also find magic, as well as use a bow and arrow. The fighting is pretty clumsy, owing to the erratic enemy movements. It's not a whole lot of fun, but you'll be doing it a lot, in order to grind up experience points and gold.

Other aspects are fairly frustrating as well. At one point, you'll run into invisible monsters that are basically impossible to kill until you find the appropriate glasses. You can run away, but can also lose gold and equipment in the process. There are assorted towers to conquer, but their layouts are complex, often sending you around in circles, and there are plenty of false walls. You can also explore caves, but they're completely dark without a flashlight, which steadily drains its batteries.



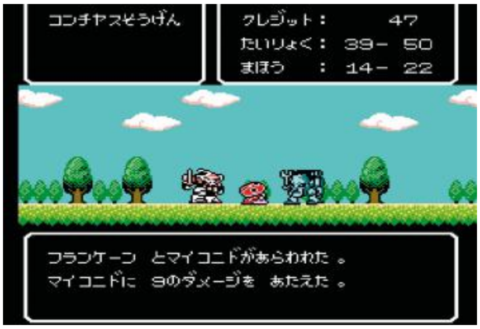
Faria
A World of Mystery & Danger
NEXOFT

It's a tough game, and all of these annoyances add up to a rather unpleasant experience, but it does have a few things going for it. It's an early RPG by Game Arts, and was directed by Takeshi Miyaji, who later worked on the *Grandia* games. The visuals are colourful, especially the close-up portraits of the NPCs, who were designed by cartoonist Yoshitoh Asari, and the game has a good sense of humour. It's also one of the handful of Famicom action RPGs to be localised. Any oasis in the desert ...

***Faria*'s American cover art hides the fact that the protagonist is supposed to be a woman.**

Mashin Eiyuuden Wataru Gaiden

Developer: Westone | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): FC



コンチヤスぞうげん

クレジット： 47
たいりょく： 39－ 50
まほう ： 14－ 22

フランケーン とマイコニドがあらわれた 。
マイコニドに 9のダメージを あたえた 。

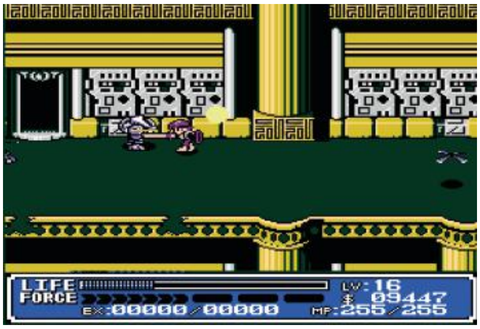
This licensed tie-in was actually made by Westone, so it has some small similarities to games in their *Monster World* series.

Mashin Eiyuuden Wataru Gaiden ("Mashin Hero Story Wataru Gaiden") is a manga/anime series, popular in the late '80s starring a boy who can control little mechas called Mashin. Americans probably know it in its PC Engine version, which was released internationally for the TurboGrafx-16, as the system's rather mediocre launch title, *Keith Courage in Alpha Zones*. This entry, released a few years later, is an RPG spinoff for the Famicom, and while it ties into the main *Wataru* plot, it's a completely original story. You do not actually control Wataru (the protagonist of the manga), as he has been captured; instead, you control another character, who you can name, and who then gets to use Wataru's Mashins to save him.

Exploration is handled as in *Dragon Quest*, complete with random battles, though action-based combat is viewed from a side-on perspective, à la *Zelda II*. The most interesting thing about this game is that it was developed by Westone, the company mostly known for the *Wonder Boy/Monster World* series. The combat here – the physics, the sound effects, the goofy, exaggerated looks on enemy faces when they get whacked with your sword – is almost identical to that in games like *Wonder Boy in Monster Land*, so fans of those titles will probably get a kick of out it. Your sword's range is pretty short, and magic spells, while useful, are limited by MP. While you can grind out levels, equip items, and ride new Mashins, it really is down to your skills in combat. But the action here is far better than in earlier, similar titles like *War of the Dead*, making it an interesting curiosity.

Crystalis

Developer: SNK | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): NES, GBC



LIFE
FORCE

EX:00000/00000

LV:16
$ 09447
MP:255/255

SNK
CRYSTALIS

In Japan, *Crystalis* was known under the much more dramatic title *God Slayer*.

In the year 1997, nuclear chaos enveloped the world. Years pass, and a young man hidden away in a cave awakens from cryogenic sleep; he doesn't know it yet, but he's destined to save this world from the evil Emperor Draygon.

Most NES action RPGs were released in the mid-to-late '80s, and borrowed significantly from either *The Legend of Zelda* or *Hydlide*. *Crystalis*, however, feels more distinctive and more modern, a predecessor to some of the 16-bit games that would later come out for the SNES/SFC. The action is faster and much less clumsy than in earlier games, as the hero can move quickly and in any direction, not just the cardinal four. In fact, there's a much greater focus on combat, plus unlike in most of the *Zelda* games, you gain experience points and level up when killing enemies. You can shoot projectiles by charging up your weapon, and you eventually get elemental themed swords (plus the eponymous Crystalis) with different magic spells. Certain enemies are only susceptible to certain kinds of attacks though, so you need to regularly switch into the menu to change your equipment.

Combined with the post-apocalyptic sci-fi world, an unusual setting for a NES RPG, this makes for an excellent title. It's also unusual in coming from SNK, which at this point was largely focused on arcade games. (There are some references to some classic SNK characters like Athena and Kensou.) There was never a sequel, but a Game Boy Color port was developed by Nintendo Software Technology. However, this has a much worse soundtrack, and alters the story to make it suitable for a younger audience.

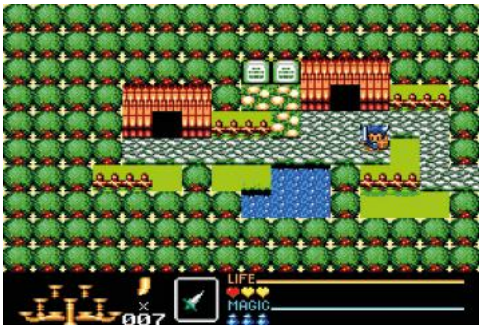
Golden Axe Warrior

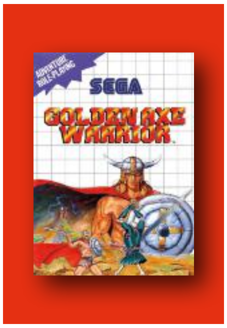
Developer: SEGA | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): SMS

The Master System had a Zelda-ish game in the form of *Golvellius*, but 1991's *Golden Axe Warrior* is a whole hog rip-off of Nintendo's legendary game. This time it's an extremely loose tie-in to SEGA's barbarian-themed arcade beat-'em-up, *Golden Axe*. Your goal in *Golden Axe Warrior*, as the unnamed hero, is to save the kingdom of Firewood by hunting down the mythical Golden Axe and defeating the evil Death Adder. Only some namechecks and familiar enemies link this game with the original, though.

Much is as it was in the original *The Legend of Zelda*, right down to the overworld structure and presence of nine dungeons, each with its own simple puzzles and boss fights. The music is not quite as good and the enemy designs are not as distinctive. However, this game is a little more advanced, offering towns where you can chat with NPCs or purchase things, as well as a magic system with four types of attack, and a much bigger arsenal of weapons and armour. You can even get a ship to sail over almost any body of water. So while it is indeed a shameless rip-off, it does feel like a significant advancement over the original *Zelda*, something Nintendo might have made if they'd done a proper sequel rather than deviating from the formula in *Zelda II*.

SEGA also published a similar game, called *Ax Battler*, for the Game Gear. It takes an RPG-ish form, in which you explore an overhead-view map and run into random battles, which are fought from a side-scrolling perspective. There are special moves you learn over the course of game, and magic potions can be used as currency, but it's really more of an action game that uses the framework of an RPG.





As a late Master System release, this game was not released in Japan, and saw publication in PAL territories but limited distribution in North America, making it quite the collector's item.

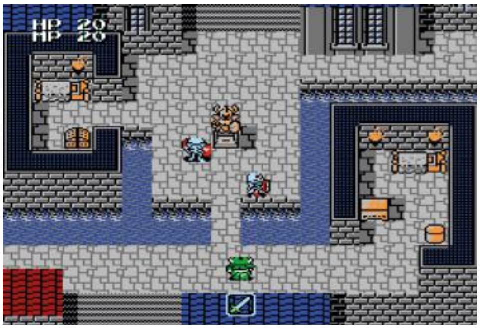
Grand Master

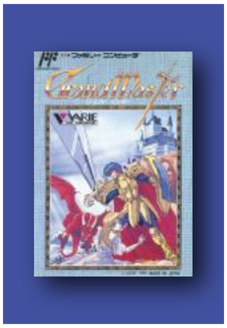
Developer: Soft Machine | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): FC

Developed by Soft Machine and published by Varie, *Grand Master* is sort of an action RPG by way of *Mega Man*. You control a warrior named Rody, who must rescue the princess Serena from the evil lord Dante. When you start the game, you can choose from five different levels – a cave, a tower, a castle, an ice cave, and a pyramid. The stages are presented from an overhead perspective, and play out a bit like a more linear, more action-based version of *The Legend of Zelda*. The stages are too constrictive to really get lost in, but there are branches, which lead to treasure chests that contain various items. While you start off with a fairly weak sword, you'll find stronger variations, plus an assortment of other weapons, like a throwing axe, a magical rod, and a morning-star that doubles as a grappling hook. There's also a levelling system, whereby beating up enemies will reward you with more HP and MP. Your items and levels carry over between levels, even if you run out of health, though the game isn't long enough to need a password.

The order of levels not only affects which weapons you can obtain, but also the ending. There is a handful of side characters, like Terry the knight, who's attempting to save his sister Freya, and their fates depend on your actions.

Purely as an action game, *Grand Master* is rather middling, because the combat just isn't that exciting, and trudging through the levels quickly gets tiresome, especially when you need to replay them. This really hits its nadir in the final stage, which is just unnecessarily long. But as a genre hybrid experiment, there's nothing else quite like it out there.





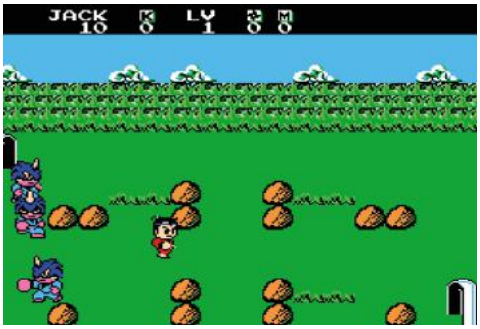
***Grand Master* is an interesting take on the action-RPG format, but the "action" part really needed to be more exciting.**

Super Chinese (series)

Developer: Culture Brain | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): FC, SFC, GB

The *Super Chinese* series has had an unusual trajectory, as did Westone's *Wonder Boy* games, in that it started as an arcade game (more widely known in English for its NES port, titled *Kung-Fu Heroes*), and then started weaving RPG elements into its console sequels. The games feature two ninja kid warriors, Ryu and Jack, as they defend their home, Chinaland, from an assortment of invaders. It's all rather tongue-in-cheek, similar to Konami's *Ganbare Goemon* series.

The first of the RPGs was *Super Chinese 2*, known as *Little Ninja Brothers* in North America for the NES. The games are structured similarly to *Dragon Quest*, with an overworld, towns, and dungeons explored via an overhead map. When random battles occur, you're thrust into an action segment that plays like a side-scrolling beat-'em-up, and a second player can join in. Once you've killed enough enemies, the remainder retreat, and it's back to adventuring. It's an innovative blend, though the encounter rate makes things drag. Some games have side-scrolling platforming sections, and boss fights are fought in typical command-based fashion, for some reason.



Culture Brain was never the best game designer, so the action scenes never quite feel right. But there are some legitimately funny bits in there that make them worth checking out. There's some crossover with other Culture Brain titles too, including cameos from *The Magic of Scheherazade* and *Hiryuu no Ken*. The first two Game Boy games, known as *Super Chinese Land* in Japan, made their way stateside under the *Ninja Boy* name, while the first SNES title came out as *Super Ninja Boy*.

Little NINJA BROTHERS

Starting as a simple arcade game, this series switched to action RPGs for a while, then morphed into fighting games, before fizzling out.

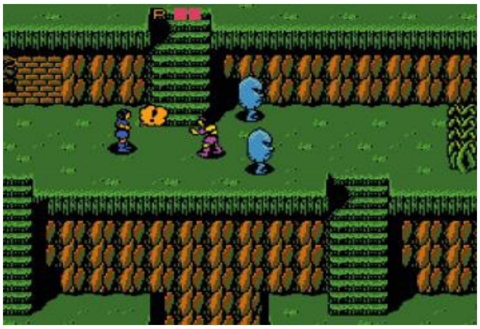
Dragon Scroll

Developer: Konami | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): FC

Dragon Scroll is Konami's attempt at an action RPG for the Famicom, and while it borrows elements from *Zelda*, it also sort of does its own thing. As the hero Feram, you must adventure through the land to find eight magic books with which to stop the Chrome Dragon.

There's not technically a single overworld, so much as a few smaller areas that are linked by warp portals; through which you access various caves, shrines, and dungeons. There's not much direction and no towns or friendly NPCs; instead, fallen enemies may give clues about where you're supposed to go and what you're supposed to be doing. Some enemies speak another language, so you need to find the item that will translate for you. However, these hints all hail from the *Castlevania II* school of game design, so many of them just don't make much sense. Many solutions are obscure, and progress is difficult unless you have a walkthrough.

Feram is an unusual hero, in that he doesn't wield swords; instead his default weapon is a magical rod. There are a few other rods to obtain, plus an assortment of magic spells. There are no shops, or equipment beyond these rods and a handful of supplementary items (which can make you walk faster, increase your defence, or display a map), but you do level up after defeating enough enemies, extending your health or magic meter.



The aimless direction and plodding pace make *Dragon Scroll* feel a little dull, but it is a Konami NES game, so it has an absolutely fantastic soundtrack, which helps give this game some energy. Otherwise, the fact that it never left Japan is no tragedy.

Konami was extremely prolific during the Famicom era, but it was required to limit the number of titles it brought overseas. So it's easy to see how *Dragon Scroll* didn't quite make the cut.

Famicom Jump (series)

Developer: Tose/Chunsoft | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): FC

Weekly Shounen Jump is one of the most popular manga magazines in Japan. In 1988, Bandai created a series of action RPGs that were crossovers involving all of its stories and characters, dubbed *Famicom Jump: Hero Retsuden.*

In the first game, you control a kid who has been sucked into a *Weekly Shounen Jump* magazine, and must explore the world to find the heroes of several different stories. Characters include Kenshiro (*Fist of the North Star*), Son Goku (*Dragon Ball*), Arale (*Dr. Slump*), Joseph Joestar (*JoJo's Bizarre Adventures*), and others, 16 in total. Enemies are visible on the overworld map, and colliding with them will generate an action scene in which you attempt to whack them. It all feels very slapped-together, plus the graphics, music, and animation are pretty clunky. It's not good, but there are certainly worse licensed games.

Yuji Horii and Chunsoft, the folks behind *Dragon Quest*, were brought aboard for a sequel in 1991. Instead of playing as a human kid, you pick one of seven manga characters (only Goku returns, plus Jotaro Kujo is now the *JoJo* rep, but otherwise the cast is all new), who come together in another crossover to fight evil. The battle system here is all new – the screen zooms up close, and the field is divided into an invisible grid, with each character able to move a certain number of squares and attack. It's similar to Square's SFC game *Live-A-Live*, released a few years later. The story itself isn't bad, but it focuses too much on original characters, so in the end, it feels like a different RPG with *Shounen Jump* characters wedged in. Still, it's definitely a huge improvement over the first game.

ファミコンジャンプ II
最強の7人

The first game has a much larger character roster but is a weaker game. The second has less manga representation but is definitely a superior product.

Willow

Developer: Capcom | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): NES

Willow is a 1988 fantasy movie from Lucasfilm, which borrows bits from *The Lord of the Rings*, and focuses on a dwarf who must make a journey across a dangerous land. Capcom made two games based on the property, a side-scrolling arcade game, and this action RPG for the NES. Despite using the characters and setting, the actual adventure is only very, very loosely based on the movie's story.

While obviously inspired by *The Legend of Zelda*, it's quite a bit more advanced than earlier clones made for the Famicom Disk System. While there's not much in the way of puzzle-solving tools, there's a wide variety of swords and shields, plus an assortment of magic spells. The overworld is large, but designed more like an expansive forest maze, and there are several towns with numerous NPCs, giving it a stronger plot. There is no currency, but there are experience points, granted following enemy defeats. Since there's a big emphasis on combat, there are actually two types of sword slash: a stab, and a swipe with a wider arc, depending on the direction you're holding.

Capcom NES games were generally pretty solid and *Willow* maintains that level of quality. The game was designed by Akira Kitamura, the creator of *Mega Man*. The visuals are decent, with large character sprites and individual scenes when talking with NPCs. When battle begins in the overworld, the leaves and trees animate, giving fights an extra bit of drama. It's not quite as good as the later action RPG *Crystalis*, but it's certainly one of the better entries on the NES, and it's definitely excellent for a licensed game.

5
E 2410
MP 85
HP 70

CAPCOM
WILLOW

Capcom made a number of licensed games in the NES era, like *DuckTales* and *Rescue Rangers*; *Willow* is one of their few Hollywood movie tie-ins.

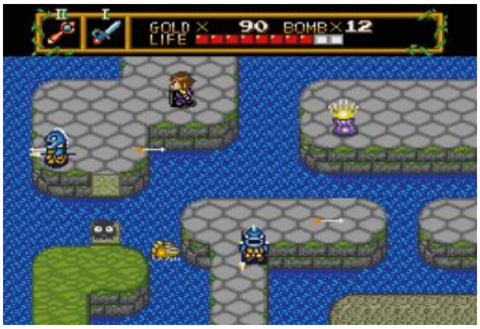
Neutopia (series)

Developer: Hudson | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): TG16

Hudson needed an action RPG to take on *The Legend of Zelda,* and what they ended up with was ... basically a slightly nicer-looking rip-off. In *Neutopia,* you control a warrior named Jazeta, tasked with hunting down eight medallions and saving the princess Aurora from the demon Dirth. The game looks and plays very similarly to *Zelda.* There are a lot more old men hidden in surprisingly well-furnished caves, and their dialogue is a little more comprehensible. Rather than having one overworld, the land is divided into four Spheres (Land, Subterrain, Sea, and Sky), each with two dungeons (called Crypts here). There's also a compass that helps point you in the direction of the next Crypt, or the boss if you're already in one. It's more linear and a little less obscure than the original *Zelda,* with improved visuals, and while the music is decent, it's not a patch on the legendary themes.

A sequel was released in 1991, though the improvements are minor. Here, you control Jazeta's son, who has had a vision indicating great danger to his father, so he sets out to rescue him. You can now move and attack in eight directions, as compared to four in the original, and there's a boomerang weapon, which was conspicuously absent in the first *Neutopia.* There's is now a single overworld, but the story is even more linear than before.

The original *Neutopia* was a decent game for 1989, but *Neutopia II* was released just a few months before *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* for the SNES, which completely wipes the floor with it, and makes it feel hugely dated in comparison.



TURBOGRAFX
ROLE-PLAYING
NEUTOPIA
NEC

As far as *Zelda* rip-offs go, the *Neutopia* games are two of the better ones, though there are certainly later 16-bit action RPGs that are far better.

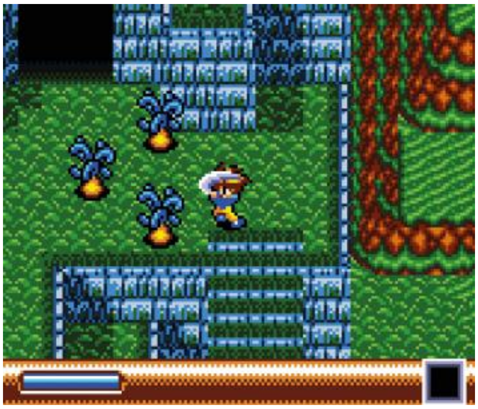
Sylvan Tale

Developer: SEGA/Nex Entertainment | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): GG

Sylvan Tale is a fairly typical action RPG, in which the hero Zetts is summoned to the land of Sylvalant to defend it from evil. However, it draws from Westone's *Wonder Boy: The Dragon's Trap,* in that the hero begins as a human but can take the forms of assorted beasts as he progresses through the story. The human form uses a sword and can pull blocks, while the turtle form can hide in its shell and dash around to attack foes, or use its weight for switches. The mole form can crush rocks with its claws and dig holes in the ground with a drill spin manoeuvre, while the mouse form is small and can pass through holes. The merman can move through water, and the hidden bird form lets you fly over enemies.

There are no experience points or gold, and equipment is limited to whatever items you find, including sword skills and beast forms, and other items that expand your max health or improve your attack or defence. It does feel a little cramped, thanks to the low Game Gear resolution, and the human form's sword is a bit small, but otherwise it plays well; the ability to run really helps. The visuals are well done and the music is decent.

Coming at the end of the system's life, *Sylvan Tale* was only released in Japan. While the Master System had a few action RPGs, like *Golvellius* and *Golden Axe Warrior,* this is one of the few of this type for the Game Gear. The game is believed to have been co-developed by Nex Entertainment, the folks behind other SEGA action RPGs, such as *Crusader of Centy* and *Linkle Liver Story.*

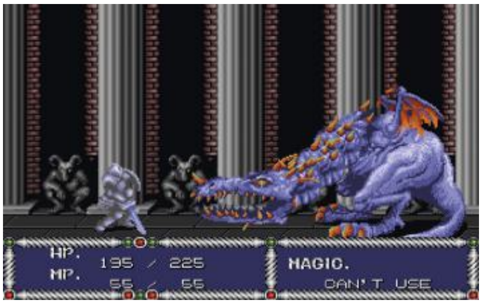


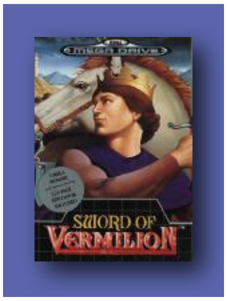
GAME GEAR
SYLVAN TALE
SEGA

***Sylvan Tale* is one of the games featured on the Game Gear Micro miniature consoles released in Japan in 2020.**

Sword of Vermilion

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): GEN





Sword of Vermilion was one of the first RPGs released on the Mega Drive, and as such, the developers were eager to show off what the 16-bit console could do. You play a young knight who learns he's the rightful prince of the kingdom of Excalabria, and sets off on an adventure to save the land from the evil Tsarkon.

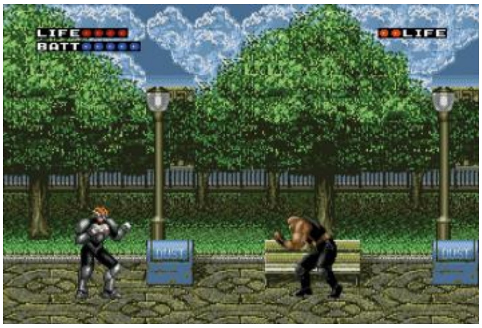
The game is an assemblage of different RPG genres – towns are viewed from an overhead perspective, while fields and dungeons are displayed first-person style. When you run into combat with random, smaller enemies, you're switched back to an overhead view, as you hack and slash at everything until it's all dead. Boss fights are shown at a side-scrolling perspective – these gigantic creatures were used to promote the game, because they are so visually impressive. The first-person scenes look cool in motion too, as rather than having static walls like most dungeon crawlers, they're presented with several small sprites like trees and pillars, which change size as you walk past them.

Sword of Vermilion was developed by SEGA AM2, a team typically known for arcade games like *OutRun* and *After Burner*. They really try their hardest to make an interesting RPG, but the action in both types of combat segment is clumsy, difficult to control, and ultimately frustrating. The music, by Hiroshi Kawaguchi (of *OutRun* and *Space Harrier* fame), is outstanding though, and easily the biggest legacy of this title. While the game received decent reviews at the time, and is included on a number of Genesis compilations, history has not been kind to it, and most SEGA RPG fans will point to the *Phantasy Star* games as being the better entries.

***Sword of Vermilion* seeks to cram as many different RPG styles as it can into its cartridge, but none of them work particularly well.**

Rent-a-Hero No. 1

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): MD, DC, XB



In this offbeat game from SEGA, you are cast as everyday average Japanese teenager Taro Yamada, who is randomly chosen to participate in the "Rent-A-Hero" program, in which you're given a suit that lets you transform into a Sentai-esque superhero. The downside is that the suit is technically a rental, so you need to pay for it, but on the upside, you can become a local do-gooder for your fellow citizens in Aero City. Tasks are simple at the beginning, but eventually escalate into infiltrating yakuza organisations. There are no experience levels, but you can use the money obtained from your exploits to purchase combat suit upgrades.

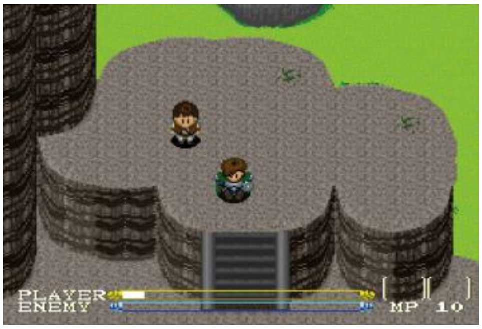
The game was developed by the same team as *Sword of Vermilion*, so it's kind of similar. The first-person dungeon crawling and overhead fighting scenes are gone, leaving the overhead exploration and side-view brawling segments. It's still a little ropey but it's a substantial improvement. The real appeal lies in its goofy sense of humour, filled with parodies of both Western and Japanese culture.

The game was not released outside of Japan, where it initially received a middling reception, but thanks to its goofball attitude, it eventually became a cult classic. This was enough to qualify it for a full remake for the Dreamcast, which upgrades the graphics to full 3D and adds in a few extra story elements, including a female partner named Rent-a-Hiroko. This also, unfortunately, did not leave Japan – it was ported to the Xbox and translated into English, and was even reviewed in magazines, but publisher AIA Games went under before it could hit the market. A disc image of this copy leaked online, at least.

The spiritual follow-up to *Sword of Vermilion* is a bit more focused, and much, much sillier, starring an everyman turned local superhero.

Lagoon

Developer: Zoom | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): X68, SNES



Zoom was a small Japanese company, known in Japan for its goofy cat mascot character Dolucky, and elsewhere for the SNES shoot-'em-up *Phalanx*. One of its earlier releases was an *Ys*-type game called *Lagoon*. It takes place in the country of Lakeland, where the water has been polluted by the evil Zerah; only the Champion of Light named Nasir can stop him. Since it was released internationally early in the SNES's life cycle, it's probably better than the actual *Ys* games, which at that point had only appeared on less popular platforms like the SEGA Master System and TurboGrafx-16 CD.

It looks and plays much like *Ys*, right down to the identical-looking equipment screen, with a few improvements such as larger character sprites and the addition of a jump button, though it's not used for much. However, play is much worse. In this SNES game, you attack by swinging your sword, but its range is so pitiful, and enemy movement so erratic, that it's hard to hit anything. However, in the *Ys* games, you can heal yourself by standing still, but only on the overworld segments – at least in *Lagoon*, you can regenerate anywhere. The plot is simple and missing *Ys'* compelling backstory. The only thing it really gets right is the soundtrack.

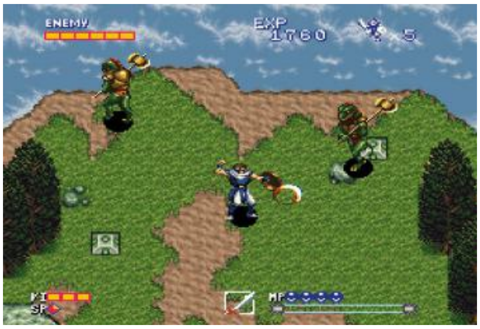
The SNES *Lagoon* is actually a port of a Japan-only X68000 game, released a year earlier, in 1990. They're fairly similar, but the PC game uses a bump system more like that in *Ys*, and it actually plays quite a bit better. There are other changes too, as the SNES version had to remove quite a few of the cutscenes, and the story is different in places too. It's still not an exemplary game, but it's certainly better than the console port.

LAGOON
SUPER NINTENDO

Kemco was early to the SNES RPG scene, with both *Lagoon* and *Drakkhen*, though they were both originally developed by different companies.

Alcahest

Developer: HAL | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SFC



In HAL's *Alcahest*, you control a warrior named Alen, on a quest to defeat the titular demon. The game looks and plays like an action RPG, but the role-playing aspects are extremely minor. It's fair to say that this is more of an action game in RPG clothing. It was initially intended to be released by HAL under the name *Guardian Blade*, but they ran into financial troubles, so the game was published by Square, which renamed it.

The game is broken up into eight stages, though the levels are not entirely linear, and you'll usually need to explore around a bit to hunt for various items, some of which are for healing, and others essential to progress. The level layouts are rarely large or all that complex, though. Your strength is increased automatically when you beat a stage, though there are some equipment upgrades to find.

The levels are also filled with blocks that will either propel you forward or send you leaping to some other part of the area. Technically, there are experience points, though in practice these are more like a score, which will grant you a continue if you level up. You have a limited number of lives, as well. In many areas, you're accompanied by a partner character – the cooler ones include a cyborg and a dragon goddess – who trails behind you and attacks when you attack, plus you can activate their special power at the expense of some SP. You also acquire the powers of elemental guardians as you progress through the game, all of whom have their own charge attacks with your main sword, as well as special abilities. Overall, it's a decent title, as long as you go in expecting an arcade-style hack-and-slash, rather than something like *Zelda* or *Ys*.

アルカエスト
ALCAHEST
SQUARESOFT

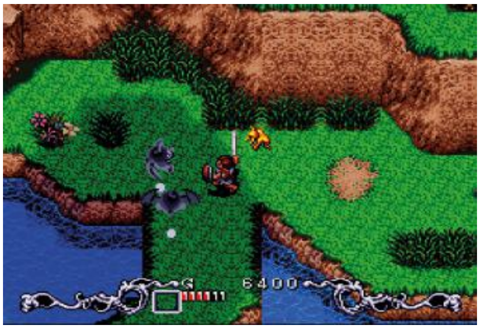
***Alcahest* is unlike any of Squaresoft's other SFC RPGs ... and that's because it was made by a different company.**

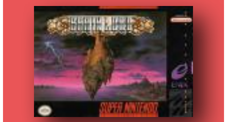
Brain Lord

Developer: Produce | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SNES

In *Brain Lord*, you control a young man named Remeer, who is on a quest to hunt down the dragon that killed his father. Developed by Produce, the team behind *The 7th Saga* and *Mystic Ark*, it shares a few names and references with them, but is otherwise unrelated, as *Brain Lord* is an action RPG. Remeer can equip a number of weapons, like swords, boomerangs and flails, and has access to various magic spells, which he can use as much as he wants, as long he charges them. There are also various fairies you can find (and name), which float alongside him and cast magic spells at their own discretion. Strangely, they can level up with experience points but Remeer cannot. Unusually in a game of this kind, the hero can jump, which allows for some platforming challenges in dungeons. Together with the emphasis on puzzles, this makes it feel like a predecessor to Matrix's 1997 PlayStation game *Alundra*. Indeed, as the game goes on, these end up becoming more difficult than the combat.

The character artwork was provided by Sachiko Kamimura, known for her work on *The Heroic Legend of Arslan*. In-game, the visuals aren't quite so attractive, as the perspective gives the characters somewhat awkward proportions, and the animations are goofy. One nice touch is that Remeer is joined by several companions, who don't directly adventure with him but rather travel independently. They can be found in dungeons, where you can stop and chat with them. The world isn't terribly large – there are two towns (one named Toronto for some reason) and five dungeons – so the adventure isn't too long. *Brain Lord* never proved particularly popular, but it's a solid game.





***Brain Lord* maybe isn't the best title for this game, but as far as 16-bit action RPGs go, it's not too bad.**

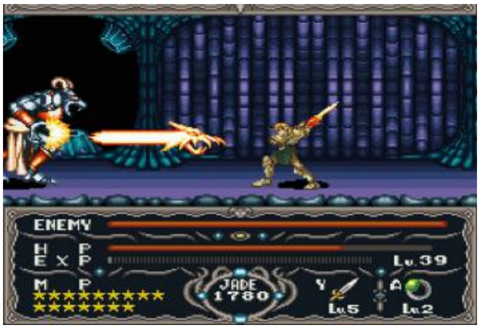
Dragon View

Developer: Kemco | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SNES

Drakkhen is a really curious game, developed by French company Infogrames. Mixing up aspects of adventure games and RPGs, it features a 3D overworld rendered via polygons, and includes strange enemies like landsharks and giant dog heads. While initially developed for home computers, it's mostly known for its SNES port by Kemco, which was the first RPG on the platform. As such, it did gain some popularity.

Kemco still held the rights to the game, and went on to create its own sequel, called *Super Drakkhen* in Japan, and renamed *Dragon View* in North America. It technically continues the storyline, though it's not like the original game had all that strong a plot. Rather than creating a party of characters, you only control one hero, named Alex, who must rescue his girlfriend. There's a stronger story here (interestingly told from a narrator's perspective in the English translation), though it's boilerplate fantasy-type stuff. The only other significant aspect kept from *Drakkhen* is the first-person 3D overworld, with random battles. These fight scenes, as well as towns and dungeons, are viewed from a side-scrolling perspective, and play out something like a simple arcade beat-'em-up. But otherwise, all of the elements of action RPGs are present, including experience and level gaining, different weapons (including a boomerang and a bow), magic spells, equipment, and even simple puzzles.

Though it's almost nothing like *Drakkhen*, there's also no other RPG that's like *Dragon View*. Though the combat is a little ropey and the play area is small, thanks to the status window, it sets itself apart nicely from other 16-bit ARPGs.

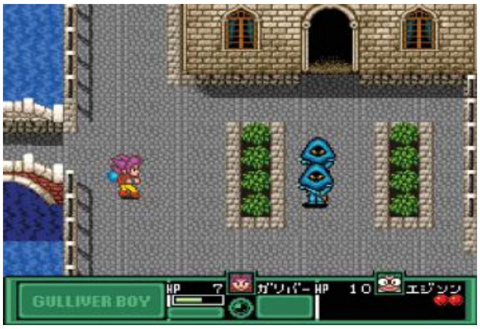


DRAGON VIEW

It's curious that *Drakkhen* had such high name recognition in Japan that Kemco created a sequel to it, despite having few real connections to it.

Kuusou Kagaku Sekai Gulliver Boy

Developer: Hudson/Bandai | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC, PCECD, SAT



Kuusou Kagaku Sekai Gulliver Boy ("Imagination Science World Gulliver Boy") was a multimedia project helmed by Ouji Hiroi, one of the key minds behind the *Tengai Makyou* series. The story takes place in a European sci-fi alternate reality, where high science and magic co-exist. The character designs are by Toyoo Ashida (*Mashin Eiyuden Wataru*) with music by Kohei Tanaka.

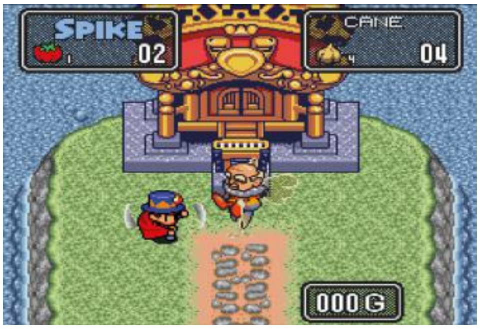
Most of Europe is under attack by the Spanish Empire, ruled by the evil King Yudo. The hero is Gulliver Toscanni, who is joined by his genius inventor friend Edison and magical lady friend Misty, who is a descendent of the Moon Queen. Gulliver attacks using a special weapon called a Minder, which loads discs with various attacks. A 50-episode anime TV series was aired during 1995, with three game tie-ins. The Game Boy got a simple puzzle game, while this PC Engine CD game from Hudson is an RPG much in the vein of their *Tengai Makyou* series. While FMV games were common on the SEGA CD, they were extremely rare on the TurboGrafx-16 CD. *Gulliver Boy* uses HuVideo compression technology to allow for full anime cutscenes on this system, instead of the mostly still-motion visuals of other PCE games. It was ported to the Saturn the same year, in only slightly enhanced form.

The Super Famicom game, released in 1996 by Bandai, is an action RPG similar to *Secret of Mana*. The player controls Gulliver, Edison, and Misty, though rather than all three appearing in play at the same time, you switch between them at will. Characters on the bench will also replenish their health and powers. It's shorter than the PC Engine version, though easier for non-Japanese speakers.

The PC Engine CD version is much longer, with a stronger story, but the action RPG SFC version is more interesting to play.

The Twisted Tales of Spike McFang

Developer: Bullet-Proof Software/Red Entertainment | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SNES



Makai Prince Dorabocchan was a cutesy side-scroller for the PC Engine starring a little kid vampire. The sequel, which was released in the United States as *The Twisted Tales of Spike McFang,* switched platforms to the SNES and changed the genre to action RPG. On the island of Vladamasco, the evil Von Hesler has kidnapped the other two rulers, Vampra and Dracuman, leaving their kids, Camelia and the titular Spike, to retake their kingdoms.

Spike primarily attacks by spinning around, whacking enemies with his cape. He can also attack by throwing his hat, plus there are plenty of secondary skills which require cards to use. Later in the adventure, Spike is joined by Rudy and Camelia, who are computer controlled; they aren't very powerful but they are invincible. In addition to finding money to purchase stronger hats or ability cards, Spike also gains experience points as he defeats enemies.

Since the game is aimed towards kids, it's pretty linear, with no overworld and not much in the way of exploration. It seems like the localisers felt the game was also a little too easy, since the English version makes enemies take more hits, and also removes the life replenishments that occur when levelling up or reloading saves. It's one of those things that doesn't really make the game harder so much as more annoying. But it's still an amusing game – Spike is a vegetarian, so he replenishes health with tomatoes or tomato juice, and he's aided by his butler, who communicates via cell phone. Since so many action RPGs of the era use a standard fantasy theme, this goofiness is quite refreshing.

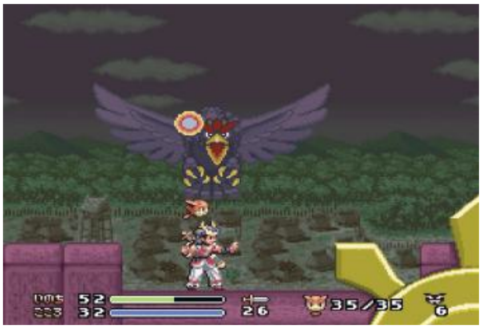
Spike McFang **didn't really make much of an impact, which is too bad, because it's a fun, cutesy game.**

Bushi Seiryuuden

Developer: Game Freak | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): SFC

The world of *Bushi Seiryuuden: Futari no Yuusha* ("Warriors of the Blue Dragon Legend: The Two Heroes") is based on medieval Japan. There are two creation gods – the brother of the sea, and the sister of the mountains. The god of the sea grew jealous of his sibling, and sent demons down into the world. The ocean goddess drafts in a human boy named Jin, who fights back with the help of Wokuu, a girl who has been transformed into a flying monster.

On the overhead-view map, you control Jin as he explores each area. However, when he encounters an enemy or enters a dungeon, the view switches to a side-scrolling perspective. If there are no bad guys on the screen, the game functions as a regular platformer, but if an enemy hops into view, time stops and the flow changes to turn-based. As in a Rogue-like such as *Mystery Dungeon*, every time you move, the enemy moves as well. Jin has a sword, and can also throw spirit-energy bullets, plus he can learn numerous skills as the game progresses. Just as important is using Wokuu effectively, as while she's not all that strong, she can lift Jin into the air, or distract bad guys. If you beat enemies quickly, you get bonus magatama beads, which are important items to collect.



BUSHI
青龍伝
〜二人の勇者〜
古代神話RPG

Bushi Seiryuuden is a turn-based action-platformer of sorts, which isn't something you see very often.

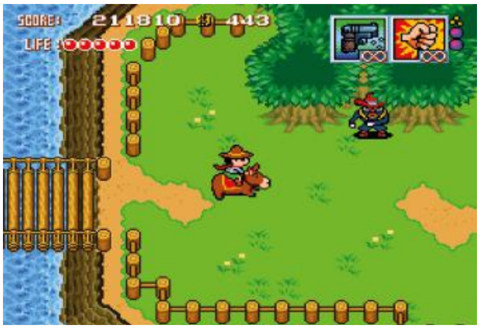
Not only is *Bushi Seiryuuden* a very innovative game, it has a nice sense of style, based around Japanese mythology. When talking to NPCs, the screen zooms in to a first-person perspective. The game was developed by Game Freak and has artwork by *Pokémon* character designer Ken Sugimori, so the art style will probably look familiar. As a late SFC release, it's quite a collector's item in Japan.

Gunman's Proof

Developer: Lenar | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): SFC

Gunman's Proof (alternatively known as *Ganpuru*, or *Gunple*) is a sci-fi western, in which something from outer space crashes into the desert near a small American town, causing all sorts of trouble. Another UFO makes the visit to Earth, and convinces your character, a local child, to lend them his body, allowing them to hunt down the invaders and send them packing.

Gunman's Proof rips off *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* for some reason. Although it doesn't remotely make sense within the American Wild West context of the game, it looks a lot like Hyrule, dungeons and all. But it's also much more action-focused – the protagonist has a variety of guns at his disposal. Other, limited-use, weapons include fireworks, machine guns, and flamethrowers. The labyrinths are almost completely devoid of puzzles; instead you simply explore and hunt for treasures. As a result, there aren't any tools, though there are items that give you skills (like swimming), life capsules that expand your life meter, and gold for buying items. Rather unusually, there's an extra life system, when you run out of health. There's also a score, and you're graded after beating a dungeon, granting you extra points. The score doesn't actually do much beyond granting extra lives though.



A STRANGE WORLD
ガンプル
GUNMAN'S PROOF
WANTED!
ASCII

Gunman's Proof is credited to Akihito Tomisawa, a designer at Game Freak, and Isami Nakagawa, a manga author.

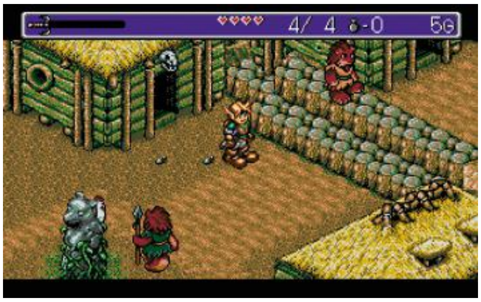
The logo reads "A Strange World" and boy howdy, is that correct! Anachronisms abound in this weird game, along with some oddball enemy designs, as well as some hugely racist caricatures. It's also fairly short, and doesn't have even a fraction of the longevity of a *Zelda* title, but it's still a peculiar and mildly amusing game.

Landstalker

Developer: Climax | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): GEN

Landstalker: The Treasure of King Nole stars elven treasure hunter Nigel and his faithful fairy friend Friday as they search for the eponymous treasure on Mercator Island. It is superficially similar to *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, though there's quite a bit that sets it apart from Nintendo's counterpart. It was developed by Climax Entertainment, who helped out with the Genesis *Shining* games, so it has a very similar vibe, and also includes art by Yoshitaka Tamaki.

The entire game is viewed from an isometric perspective, common in British microcomputer games but uncommon for Japanese RPGs (seen only in this and Treasure's middling *Light Crusader*). Since you can only move at 45° angles, it takes some getting used to, but it allows for maps with greater depth than the typical action-RPG overhead kind. Rather than hunting items for use in dungeon-based puzzle-solving, you face a fair few platforming challenges, which is the biggest hurdle to overcome with this game. They can be quite difficult, due to depth perception issues, but the result is a game that's more focused than a typical *Zelda* title.



GENESIS
LANDSTALKER
SEGA

Once you get the hang of it, it's an incredibly charming title. It has quite a bit in common with the same team's *Shining* series, including a pleasant storybook setting. The characters have quite a bit of personality, particularly Friday, who regularly bickers with Nigel, providing some comedy, as well as a rival trio of thieves led by a woman named Kayla who try (and repeatedly fail) to stop Nigel. The script is fun too, though some adult jokes were cleaned up in localisation. The game never quite got a sequel, but it did lead to several spiritual successors.

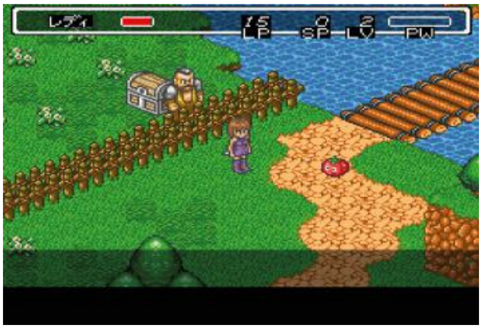
A remake of *Landstalker* was announced for the PSP, though nothing came of it, leaving the Genesis game to stand alone.

Ladystalker

Developer: Climax | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC

The unfortunately-titled *Ladystalker: Kako kara no Chousen* ("Challenge from the Past") is a sort of follow-up to *Landstalker*, though this time for the Super Famicom. It stars a rich young woman named Lady, who's locked up in her family's mansion because of her inability to stay out of trouble. She escapes anyway, and along with her two servants, Yoshio and Cox, heads for the dangerous Deathland Island to search for treasure.

Although it looks and plays like *Landstalker* on the surface, quite a bit has changed. You can no longer jump, so most of the troublesome platforming obstacles are gone. Instead, you can dash, which lets you hop over short distances. Encounters are random, as enemies fall from the sky every now and then, and must be defeated before you can move on. While the player directly controls Lady, the computer manages the other two characters in combat, though they can also be given individual orders. There are also experience points, and you can gain levels.



TAITO
LADY STALKER

The game maintains the silliness of *Landstalker*, though the visuals are slightly worse in spite of the expanded colour palette. The biggest downside is that Lady doesn't talk a whole lot. There's some slight S&M naughtiness, as she attacks using whips and boots while wearing a mini-skirt, but the player is left to fill in the blanks of her personality.

The game is purported to have been pitched to Enix as a spinoff of *Dragon Quest IV*, based on Princess Alena and her two servants. But being unable to obtain the licence, they created their own property. However, there are still many similarities, especially in the enemies and item names.

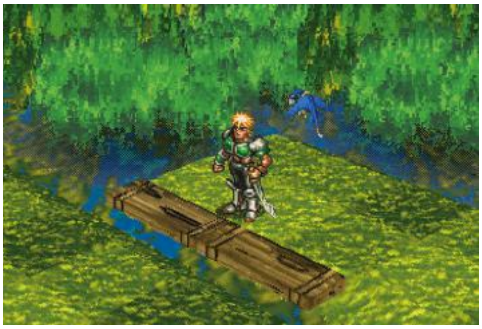
This follow-up creates a cool heroine, but doesn't manage to make her an interesting personality.

Dark Savior

Developer: Climax | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SAT

In *Dark Savior*, you control a bounty hunter named Garian, in charge of escorting the dangerous monster Bilan to an Alcatraz-esque Prison Island. Of course, things go wrong almost immediately, and Bilan escapes. The unique aspect is that there are five Parallels, with different storylines. In one, Garian pursues Bilan to Prison Island and tries to recapture him before he kills all of the other prisoners; in another, he apprehends Bilan early on and instead investigates the unethical experiments going on in the jail. One gets particularly wild, as the parallel dimensions end up colliding with each other. It can get confusing, though, as some storylines are vague and undercooked. Within the main scenarios, there are also several smaller variations, though their effects are often minimal.

The game plays similarly to *Landstalker*, though the characters are 2D sprites that are much larger and more detailed than before, while the backgrounds are 3D, and can be rotated slightly to peek around the scenery. Unusually, combat is presented as one-on-one battles like those in fighting games, complete with best two-out-of-three matches, though still presented on an isometric plane.



The multiple parallel storylines of *Dark Savior* are its greatest strength, but its platforming challenges are a huge hurdle.

With the emphasis on the multi-scenario structure, many of the role-playing elements of previous Climax games are stripped back. There's not much exploration or puzzle solving, and the emphasis is mostly on straightforward isometric platforming. And despite the addition of 3D, this is just as problematic as in *Landstalker*, if not more so, since the difficulty level is much more punishing. The result can often be quite frustrating, though the unusual storytelling keeps the game compelling.

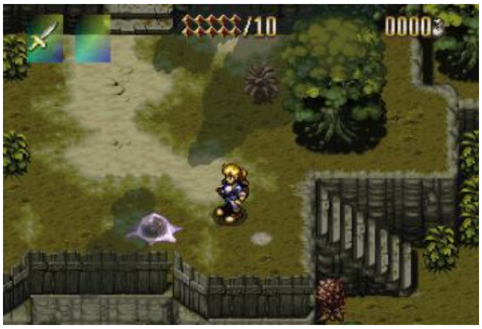
Alundra

Developer: Matrix | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1

In 1994, some of the staff members of Climax and Telenet splintered off to form Matrix Corporation, with its first title being the 1997 action RPG *Alundra*. This is basically a spiritual successor to the earlier *Landstalker*, featuring the same elven-looking hero, as well as artwork by *Landstalker/ Shining Force* illustrator Yoshitaka Tamaki. The eponymous hero is a Dreamwalker, who sets off to visit the town of Inoa, whose residents are plagued with nightmares. While there is a *Zelda*-like overworld in the lands that surround the town, the dungeons are actually located in the dream world of its denizens, so Alundra enters their minds to destroy the evil within.

The main difference from *Landstalker* is that it ditches the isometric perspective for a more typical overhead view, though the hero can still jump, so it retains its predecessor's platforming elements. However, in spite of its similarities, it's a much darker game, filled with various character deaths and a fight against a demon god. The Working Designs translation attempts to introduce some levity via some goofy dialogue here and there, but it doesn't really work. Plus, the difficulty level is much higher than in a typical *Zelda*-type game. One particularly nasty puzzle, involving pushing several ice pillars around the stage, is liable to give players nightmares of their own. Still, the removal of the isometric perspective generally makes it more playable than Climax's other games, and it's certainly one of the better *Zelda*-style action RPGs.

Matrix also developed a sequel called *Alundra 2,* though it's a completely different (and much worse) game that shifts everything into 3D.



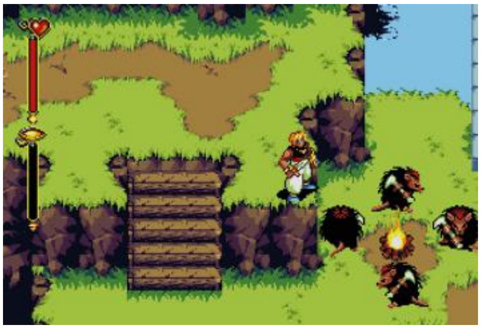
In the absence of a proper sequel to *Landstalker*, *Alundra* is the closest we'll get.

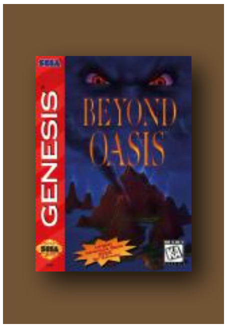
Beyond Oasis / Legend of Oasis

Developer: Ancient | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): GEN, SAT

Beyond Oasis (known as *The Story of Thor* in Europe and Japan) is an action RPG with a heavy emphasis on the action part. You control a warrior named Ali as he explores a kingdom inspired by ancient Persia, seeking a variety of elemental spirits. The visuals are fantastic – they seem to have been inspired by the Genesis *Aladdin* game, with its lush, cartoon-like look and slick animation, though the artistry isn't at quite the same level. The music is by Yuzo Koshiro – it's like a rousing orchestral movie soundtrack performed on the Genesis synth, but it doesn't really work in practice and never feels appropriate for the action.

The game was developed by Ancient, Koshiro's family company, who also worked on *Streets of Rage 2*. The influence of beat-'em-ups is apparent, as there is a variety of moves Ali can perform pummels and throws. Some are based on command motions, as in fighting games, and unlike most ARPG heroes, he can duck and jump. There are also plenty of magic spells you can use with your elemental companions. The perspective makes fighting a little awkward, but it's fun once you get the hang of it. However, it really does feel like the fighting is the main emphasis – there's not much story, it's very short, and while there are weapons beyond Ali's dagger, they're almost all limited in use (except for a few bonus weapons found in extra sub-quests). There are quests for gems that power up your elemental friends, and you can increase your strength by grabbing hearts dropped by enemies, but otherwise the RPG elements are pretty thin. A sequel was released on the Saturn, called *Legend of Oasis*, which simplifies the fighting but amps up the puzzle solving.



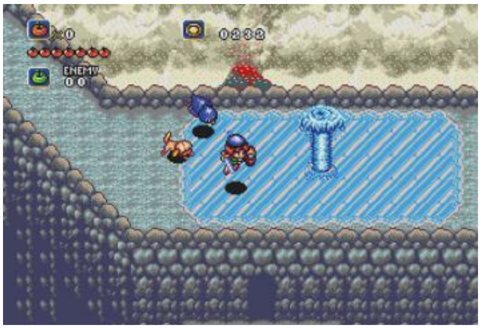


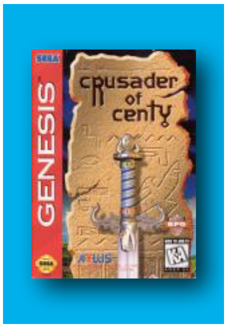
The fantastic visuals, unusual score, and fun fighting system make this a unique action RPG.

Crusader of Centy

Developer: Nex Entertainment | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): GEN

The look and feel of *Crusader of Centy* is very obviously patterned after *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. However, its key gimmick is that its hero, the young boy Corona, gains the ability to talk to animals, who then lend him their powers. (Conversely, he can no longer talk to humans.) These animal abilities act like the items you would get in a *Zelda* game in order to solve puzzles – you can use them to freeze animals or run faster, and many are built around your ability to throw your sword like a boomerang. Two animals can travel with you at a time, and some of their powers can be combined to let you do things like drain HP from monsters. Unlike in *Zelda* games, you can jump, too. It's a reasonably fun experience, though it really can't match up to the better SNES action RPGs. It's more action-y and less puzzle-heavy, but there's also not much to explore. There is no actual overworld, just a map that you use to travel between destinations, plus neither the story nor the world are all that involving. But considering there were few games of its type on the Genesis – the only other similar title is *Landstalker* – it's a good enough substitute.





This game is known as *Shin Souseiki Ragnacenty* ("New Genesis Ragnacenty") in Japan and *Soleil* in Europe. The game's working title was *Shining Rogue*, as it was meant to be an early expansion of the "Shining" RPG label. However, it was not developed by the same team as *Shining Force*, but rather by a team called Nextech. They would later work on a number of other action RPGs, including *Linkle Liver Story* (Saturn), *Shining Soul* (Game Boy Advance), and *Shining Tears/Shining Wind* (PlayStation 2).

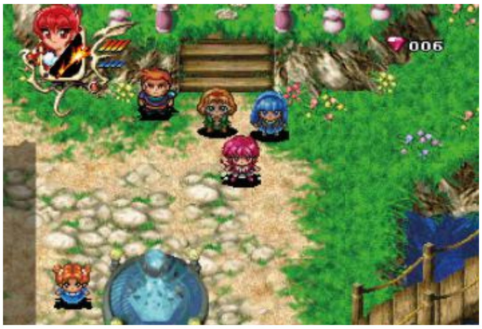
The Genesis didn't get too many *Zelda*-style games, and this is certainly a good one.

Magic Knight Rayearth

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SAT

Magic Knight Rayearth is a manga/anime created by artistic group CLAMP about a trio of teenage girls who are whisked away from their everyday lives to save the world of Cephiro. The game adapts the first act of the manga, though there have been quite a few changes, so it's a good experience even if you're familiar with the material. SEGA created a few games based on this licence, including this Saturn action RPG tie-in. It's quite a bit better than the typical anime licence, especially since it was developed by some of the same staff as *Phantasy Star IV*.

The game is a standard action RPG. You can switch between the three heroines – Hikaru, Umi, and Fuu – each of whom has her own attack and magic abilities. You can also jump, somewhat rare in games that use an overhead perspective. The sprite-based visuals are gorgeous, showing off why the Saturn positioned itself as the king of 2D animation. It also faithfully adapts the source material by having lots of cute super-deformed character portraits used during speeches. The game plays well, though the controls are a little slippery and the short range of the attacks is annoying.



SEGA SATURN
MAGIC KNIGHT RAYEARTH

Since the game was aimed as teenage girls, the difficulty in the Japanese version is fairly low. However, seeing that the audience in North America would probably consist of slightly older geeks, Working Designs made the game much harder for its release there. But as was common for them, they really didn't make it more challenging so much as more frustrating. It's still a solid game, though as the last Saturn title published in North America, more than three years after its Japanese release, it has become incredibly expensive.

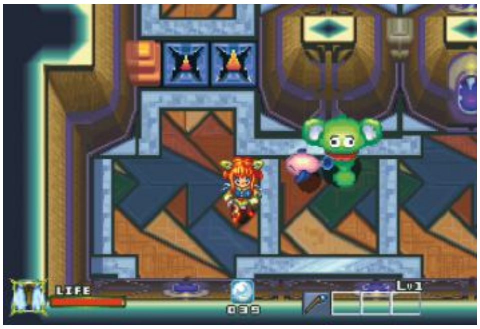
SEGA put a decent effort into this early Saturn RPG, though localisation issues meant it didn't see American release until the Saturn was already dead.

Linkle Liver Story

Developer: Nex Entertainment | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SAT

Linkle Liver Story (which should probably be something like "Wrinkle River Story" or something to that effect) takes place on the lush world of Mamouna, which is inhabited by various races of anthropomorphic creatures. Their peace is disturbed by encroaching evil, so the foxgirl Kitsch rises to the occasion to defend her planet.

Developed by Nextech, the game is the successor to *Crusader of Centy* on the Genesis. Being mostly 2D, it's a little like *Magic Knight Rayearth* – the backgrounds aren't quite as detailed, but the sprites are beautifully animated, with lots of nice little touches, like the way the heroine's tail flutters in the wind when she runs. Kitsch can jump, tumble, and dash around the landscapes, and she's fun to control, more so than the hero of *Shining Wisdom*, which features a similar gimmick. She's also joined by Puchimuku, a cute little spore who can be tossed as a weapon and has an assortment of magical abilities.



SEGA SATURN
SEGA

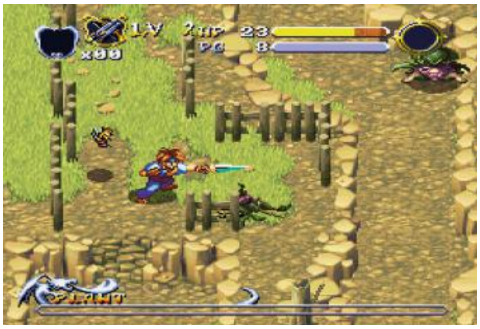
Additionally, Mamouna is so peaceful that they don't even sell weapons. Instead, you cultivate them by planting seeds found throughout the game world. There are seven different types of weapon – swords, hammers, boomerangs, and so forth – each with one of four elemental attributes, which can be further modified by the effects of the four seasons. While Kitsch does not level up directly, her weapons do so instead.

The adventure is a little easy and it's not terribly long, and like *Crusader of Centy*, it forgoes an actual world map in favour of an area select screen. Still, the bright visuals, charming characters, and weapon crafting flexibility make for an amusing journey.

Another early action RPG from SEGA that was passed over for localisation, probably because it looks too cutesy.

Brave Prove

Developer: Data West | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1



BRAVE PROVE
DATA WEST

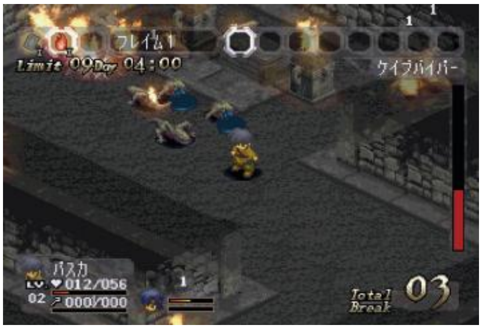
In *Brave Prove*, you play as a young man named Ars, one of a group of mountain bandits called the Wild Fangs. They discover the location of a mysterious artefact that may save the world, called the Black Crystal. The chief's daughter (and Ars' girlfriend) Sheena is sent to retrieve it, but things obviously don't go quite as planned, leading to a much grander adventure. The game feels a lot like Ancient's Genesis game *Beyond Oasis* – Ars is quite speedy and there are a number of sword combos you can execute, plus you're joined by various elementals to provide you with magic.

Data West (not to be confused with the more prolific Data East) was a pretty small company – they primarily made PC adventure games, but also the shoot-'em-up series *Rayxanber* – and that low-budget aesthetic is reflected in *Brave Prove*. The visuals are entirely 2D and look quite plain, worse than *Beyond Oasis*, which was a game from a whole generation back, and the music is pretty generic too. The game's biggest issue is that the dungeons are just way too large, and even the ones that aren't are unnecessarily winding. It's also easy to miss areas that you might need to bomb to uncover hidden openings. While some simple puzzles break up the tedium, most of the time is just spent running through endless identical-looking caverns, beating up the same handful of enemies. These bad guys are rarely a challenge but certainly are hit sponges, unless you've grinded up your experience levels or obtained enough gold to get better weapons. The action feels fun, at least, and fans of this type of game will find an acceptable if not particularly outstanding experience.

By 1998, games like *Brave Prove* were going out of style, and it's not really as beefy or as well-designed as competitors like *Alundra*.

Bealphareth

Developer: Sony | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS1



Bealphareth

Bealphareth takes place in a dark, medieval time, in the town of Callus Bastide, which is ungoverned and lawless. Built on top of a series of underground ruins, its depths are said to hold a stone that can grant immortality, so it attracts people of all kinds – treasure seekers, scholars, and criminals. As a newcomer to the city, you can create a character, selecting gender, birthplace, weapon type and the purpose of your visit to the city – then you meet with fellow adventurers, form parties, and hunt for treasure.

The game is presented from an isometric perspective, which makes it rather difficult to control. Though you only control one character at a time when dungeon crawling, you can switch to another with a command. Each has their own weapon, as well as a variety of traps that can be set to spring on foes. If you attack enemies with combo chains, then you can increase the amount of gold obtained. Time also passes when you're adventuring, which influences various events. The visuals are stark, though the character designs are by Koya Katsuyoshi, the artist for the SFC *Fire Emblem* games.

Bealphareth would be a rather standard dungeon crawler, except for the relationships you can develop with your partners. There are 13 in total, and the endings reflect the bonds developed, incorporating romance where these involve opposite sexes. The plot itself isn't all that involving, but there's a lot of interesting backstory, as each of the other adventurers has their own motive. The game was developed as part of the Game Yarouze! design contest by Sony, and while it does feel low budget, you can feel the amount of care put in by the staff.

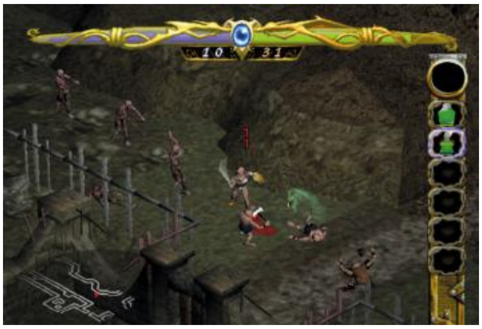
***Bealphareth*'s humble origins, boring cover and simple visuals aren't really indicative of the care the developers put into this dungeon crawler.**

Record of Lodoss War

Developer: Neverland | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): DC

There have been a handful of *Lodoss War* games in the past, including some PC games from HummingBird Soft and an SRPG for the Mega CD by Kogado. The Dreamcast version, subtitled *Advent of Cardice* in Japan and developed by Neverland (*Lufia, Energy Breaker*) is, basically, a *Diablo* clone. You control a warrior who has been resurrected and is set off on an adventure to defeat the dark dog of destruction. You hack, you slash, you chug curaive potions, you loot, and then equip that loot on your hero. The levels are not randomly generated but the item drops are. At a certain point, you can find runes and have them engraved to strengthen your weapons. However, it's stripped back *Diablo* in a number of ways – you can't pick a character class, and it's only single player, though at times you are joined by computer-controlled partners. This feels like a missed opportunity, especially seeing how the Dreamcast had online capabilities.

At the outset the game barely seems related to the *Record of Lodoss War* licence, seemingly more like dark generic Western fantasy, though familiar faces like Parn and Deedlit do show up to join your adventure for a bit. The game does work nicely with the controller though, and since the only type of game available at the time was the somewhat janky PlayStation port of *Diablo*, this actually is a reasonable alternative. Someone at Neverland must've enjoyed this type of action RPG though, since it was used as the basis for the developer's next few games, *Shining Force Neo* and *Shining Force EXA* for the PlayStation 2, though these both have brighter visuals more in line with typical Japanese RPGs.



Record Of Lodoss War
Dreamcast

Record of Lodoss War **is surely an unusual property to turn into a** ***Diablo*** **clone, but that appears to have been the wheelhouse of developer Neverland.**

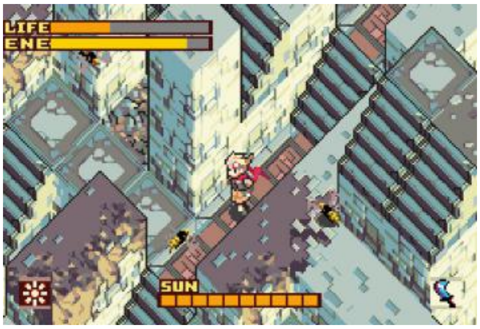
Boktai (series)

Developer: Konami | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): GBA, DS

Boktai is a contraction of the Japanese title *Bokura no Taiyou* ("Our Sun"), and is an innovative action-adventure game from Konami. You control Solar Boy Django, a vampire hunter who tracks down undead baddies, equipped with his Gun del Sol. The design was drafted by Hideo Kojima, though the games were actually directed by Ikuya Nakamura, an artist on the team. Viewed from an isometric perspective, they inherit their emphasis on stealth from the *Metal Gear Solid* games; you'll often need to sneak past or surprise bad guys to attack them effectively.

The unique gimmick of the game is the solar sensor installed in the cartridge, which measures real-world sunlight levels. This is used to recharge Django's gun, plus it's required to use the Pile Driver move that's used to actually kill vampires. There's also an in-game clock that affects events and other things based on the time of day. It's an interesting idea, except that the game is extremely difficult to see on the screen when you play it outside, so it's ultimately self-defeating. In spite of that somewhat major failing, the anime/Wild West/vampire-slaying mash-up is pretty cool, even though the story is aimed towards kids.

The second *Boktai* introduces RPG elements, including experience points, upgradeable stats, and a larger number of weapons, as well as magic. The third game continues this trend, though it remained unreleased in English, despite a crossover with the *Mega Man Battle Network* games. Konami elected to soft-reboot the series for the DS with *Lunar Knights*, which gets rid of the solar sensor and replaces it with in-game weather effects.

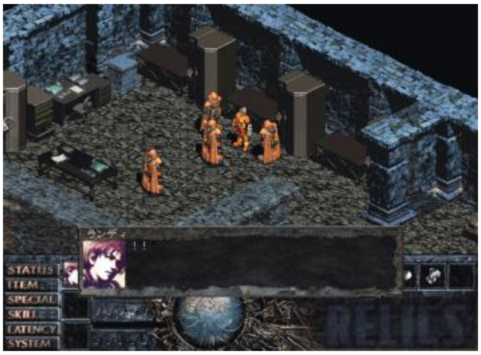


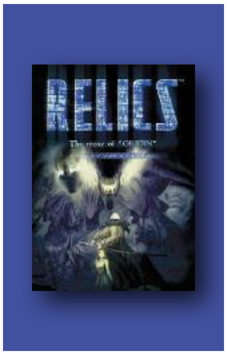
boktai
GAME BOY ADVANCE

The sun sensor put into the ***Boktai*** **cartridges was an interesting idea, but sunlight also made it impossible to see the screen on the original Game Boy Advance, making it very hard to play.**

Relics

Developer: Bothtec | Released: 1999 | Platform(s):WIN





Before becoming Quest and merging with Squaresoft, Bothtec's biggest success, an obscure side-scrolling adventure from 1986 called *Relics*, was as mysterious then as it is bizarre today. When ex-Quest staffers reformed Bothtec in the late '90s, a new *Relics* for Windows-era players seemed logical.

The Recur of Origin opens similarly to its predecessor: you awaken in unknown ruins, merely a spectre of your former self, exploring without really understanding why. You're aware, however, that other factions are here to investigate the ruins, from crimson MARX soldiers to brutish, sentient wildlife. Eventually, you become able to possess the bodies of others, tying your life force to them in exchange for actions and identities.

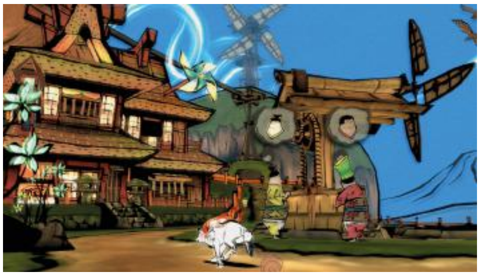
As both a remake and sequel, *The Recur of Origin* revives the original's evasive story and Giger-esque aesthetics, adding much-needed polish and complexity to its plot and systems. Each playthrough offers multiple story branches, and many skills to learn from your victims, culminating in complex, story-driven real-time dungeon crawling. It pulls from influences like *Diablo* and contemporary Korean RPGs without mimicking them, making it accessible to both previous *Relics* players and Windows-era adopters.

The alluring alien world of *Relics* proved successful enough for the new Bothtec to produce two sequels: *2nd Birth* and *Rinne*. Around 2005, Bothtec's legal battles over their *Legend of the Galactic Heroes* wargames forced their closure, leaving *Rinne*'s development to Falcom, the developer of the *Ys* series.

A revival of an unusual mid-'80s PC title, *Relics* keeps its body-swapping gimmick and adds in RPG elements and dungeon crawling.

Okami

Developer: Capcom/Clover Studios | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PS2, PS3, PS4, WII, NSW, WIN



Despite the massive popularity of *The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time*, very few other games followed its template. One of the exceptions is *Okami*, developed by Clover Studios, a subsidiary of Capcom that eventually broke off and formed PlatinumGames. It was influenced by Japanese folklore and mythology, you play as the sun goddess Amaterasu, who has taken on the form of a wolf, to fight against the encroaching Yami (Japanese for "darkness"), who has resurrected the demon Orochi.

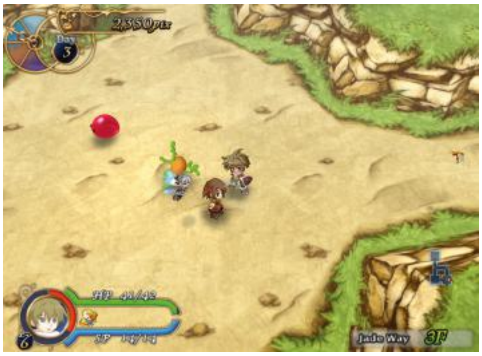
Amaterasu wields a handful of weapons, including a Reflector (a flaming shield), a Rosary (a necklace of beads), and Glaives (a set of swords). She also wields the Celestial Brush, which is an innovative way of using skills and weapons – at almost any point, you can pause the action and use a calligraphy brush to draw different symbols with various effects (drawing a bomb will drop a bomb, drawing a circle will summon the sun, and so forth). By completing sub-quests and nurturing both flora and fauna, you gain Praise points, which can be used to upgrade various abilities.

Okami uses an absolutely gorgeous cel-shaded art style that looks like Japanese sumi-e artwork in motion; it was impressive on the PS2 and is even better in the many subsequent HD re-releases. The soundtrack, using many classical Japanese instruments, is also incredible. The only real issue is its pacing, as cutscenes drag on, especially the jabbering of Amaterasu's miniature buddy Issun. The game is also divided up into three massive chapters, each of which could have been an independent release, so it's easy to burn out on. But otherwise, in most respects it's better than most of the 3D *Zelda* games that inspired it.

***The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* also featured a wolf form, but ultimately *Okami* was the better experience.**

Recettear: An Item Shop's Tale

Developer: EasyGameStation | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): WIN



RECETTEAR
An Item Shop's Tale

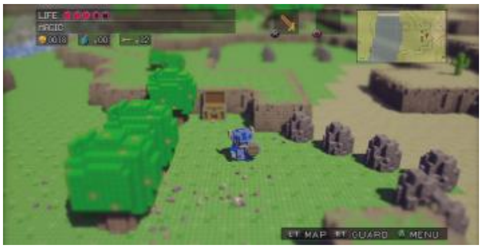
For quite a long time, the Japanese doujin software scene consisted of amateur developers trading and selling games at conventions or speciality stores. EasyGameStation made a name for itself with its high-quality titles, a few of which were based on other video games (like *Duo Princess*, from Square's PS1 game *Threads of Fate*, and *Gunner's Heart*, from Atlus' sky action game *SkyGunner*) but grew to develop original properties, like the action RPG *Chantelise*. The growing popularity of the Steam digital distribution platform allowed for these previously Japan-only titles to be more easily distributed internationally. *Recettear* was one of the first of these, released in English in 2010. Not only was it fairly popular, but it proved there was demand for JRPGs in the computer gaming sphere, and also paved the way for more doujin games.

The game is like Torneko's chapter from *Dragon Quest IV*, expanded into a whole game. A young girl, Recette, opens a shop to help pay off her father's debts, with the main source of goods being a series of ruins lying outside of town. Playing as her hired adventurers, you hack and slash through these dungeons, and the adventurer can use the equipment for themselves, or Recette can sell the spoils for profit. You also spend your time dealing with the nitty gritty of running the shop, like merchandising your wares and haggling with customers. It's fun and rewarding to see your cash grow – "Capitalism Ho!" is the game's motto – at least until it's drained by paying off your debt. Combined with the cutesy graphics and amusing localisation courtesy of Carpe Fulgur, it's easy to see why this unique game took off the way it did.

***Recettear* was one of the early Japanese indie games to see international success, thanks to its novel simulation and action RPG elements, involving running a store.**

3D Dot Game Heroes

Developer: Silicon Studio | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): PS3



PS3
3D DOT GAME HEROES

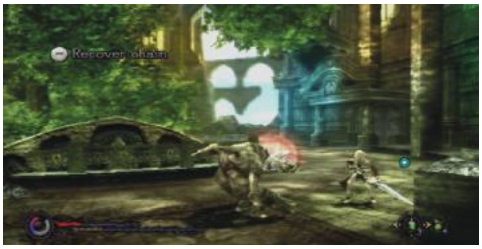
FromSoftware defined itself with action RPGs, first in its early years with niche titles like *King's Field*, and then later on with more hardcore games like *Dark Souls*. In 2009, it published *3D Dot Game Heroes*, developed by Silicon Studio, a technology developer mostly new to gaming, and this was released in between From's larger titles, positioned more on the casual end of the spectrum. Everything in the game – characters, backgrounds, weapons – is modelled with voxels, which are 3D pixels, giving everything a very boxy look. Bad guys even explode into their core building blocks when defeated. The game itself is largely patterned after the original *The Legend of Zelda*, so you explore an overworld and hunt through several dungeons while solving simple puzzles. However, it also has some *Dragon Quest* influence, particularly in the way that the characters look and move. Plus there is a custom character creator, which you can even share with other players.

However, the game leans heavily into nostalgia to carry itself. The actual design is only slightly more advanced than the original NES *Zelda*'s – there are a few character classes you can pick from, there's a wider variety of weapons (including some comically large swords), and there's a meter that powers your magic, rather than its use depleting your gold. But otherwise, it's a little too simple to carry itself beyond its initial novelty. There are other issues too – the visual style is nice but the default camera is zoomed very close up, with a heavy depth-of-field effect that badly blurs the screen. You can change to a more traditional overhead camera, which mostly fixes the issue. *3D Dot Game Heroes* is a neat title just because there really wasn't anything like it at the time, and on its own terms it's both funny and enjoyable, but it's more worthwhile to stick with the actual classics.

***3D Dot Game Heroes* is very consciously a clone of the original NES *Zelda*, done in a deliberately retro visual style using voxels.**

Pandora's Tower

Developer: Ganbarion | Released: 2011 | Platform(s): WII



Wii
Pandora's Tower
XSEED

Pandora's Tower focuses on a young couple, a man named Aeron and a woman named Elena. Elena has been struck with a curse that will cause her to become a raving demon; the only potential cure involves exploring the Thirteen Towers, a massive fortress. Aeron sets off with her, and hunts through the many areas of the Towers, bringing back the flesh of the enemies he kills, which will slow the transformation and allow Elena to keep her humanity for a little while longer.

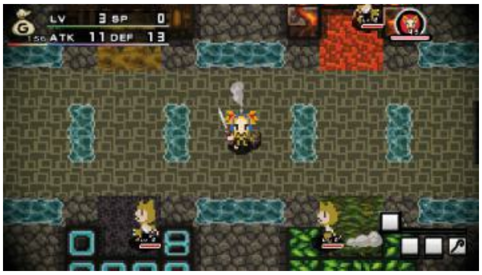
Pandora's Tower is one of the three Operation Rainfall games, but it doesn't have quite the following of *Xenoblade Chronicles*, for a few reasons: the developer, Ganbarion, was previously known only for assorted anime-based licensed games, and also probably because it's only barely an RPG. Instead, it's really more focused on action – a hardcore dungeon crawler, this ain't. Thankfully, the exploration and fighting is pretty fun, largely thanks to the chain wielded by Aeron. You can flail it around, you can bind enemies together so they can be attacked simultaneously, and you can rip armour and equipment off of enemies. It was developed with the Wii Remote in mind, but you can use a classic controller as well.

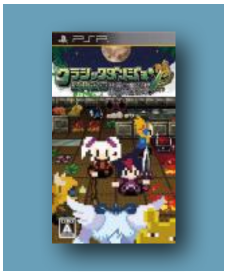
The game is divided into stages, between which you can visit the observatory, where you can purchase items and upgrade equipment. You can also chat with Elena, and beyond delivering her monster flesh, you can also give her gifts, which she will either wear or use to decorate the area. The relationship between Aeron and Elena is at the centre of the game, though it's under-developed since Aeron is a bland stand-in for the player. There's a lot of backstory, but not much in the game itself, and the adventure does get repetitive. It's got some good bits though – the bad ending, where Elena turns into a demon, eats Aeron, and then conquers the kingdom, is pretty cool.

This late Wii release is more action than RPG, but may still appeal to fans of both types.

Cladun

Developer: System Prisma | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): PSP, PSV, PS4, WIN





Cladun (short for *Classic Dungeon*, as it's known in its Japanese release) is a retro-styled trilogy of dungeon crawlers published by Nippon Ichi. It's fairly typical of the genre – explore area, kill bad guys, collect loot, and find exit – but contains some unique elements that make it as good as Nippon Ichi's other titles. Unlike other dungeon crawlers, there's a big focus on action and reflexes – no mindless hacking and slashing here. There are no items, and therefore no curatives, but instead the dungeons are littered with visible traps, some of which can heal you. Alternatively, you can also trigger these traps, get out of the way, and use them to attack your enemies.

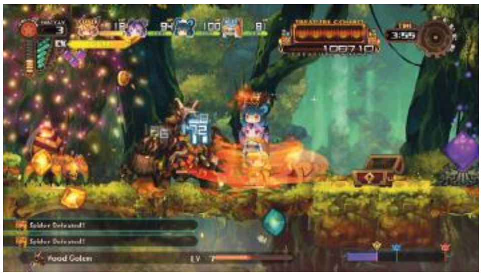
The biggest draw is the huge amount of customisation – you pick your character design from a number of set sprites, but can also edit them down to the individual pixels. There are several character classes, with the ability to switch (while retaining some skills) when you reach a certain level. You can also create multiple heroes, which you can swap out in between levels. Although you only control one character at time, secondary characters can be added to a Magic Circle, which provides stat boosts and other benefits to the main character. There are several pre-made dungeons that advance the (rather threadbare) story, plus a randomly-generated dungeon with 99 floors. It's decent as a portable time-waster, and the soundtrack is fantastic.

The first two games were released for the PSP, with the sequel, *Cladun x2*, receiving a Windows port. A third game, *Cladun Returns: This Is Sengoku!*, hit the PlayStation 4 and Vita. There's also a related title from developer Studio Prisma, called *Legasista*, for the PlayStation 3, which plays similarly, though it lacks the chunky pixel aesthetic.

The "create your own character" function lies at the centre of *Cladun*'s appeal.

Lapis x Labyrinth

Developer: Nippon Ichi | Released: 2019 | Platform(s): NSW, PS4



The RPG elements are rather simple, but the explosive, exuberant nature of *Lapis x Labyrinth* keeps it exciting in small doses.

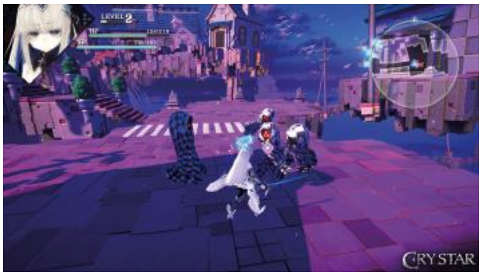
The setup of *Lapis x Labyrinth*, a side-scrolling action RPG from Nippon Ichi, harks back to the oldest of RPG tropes – you control a group of adventurers who make their base in a town, and explore the dungeons that lie beneath it to hunt for treasure. You create your band from eight mega-cutesy character classes – Hunter, Necromancer, Shielder, Maid, Gunner, Witch, Destroyer, and Bishop – and can customise a few aspects, like their hair colour. Four at a time can venture into the labyrinth, though they're actually stacked on top of each other. The game calls this the Dango system, as the super-deformed characters resemble ball-like "dango" dumplings. The one at the bottom is the leader, who does all of the attacking. Each dumpling, er, character can jump off another's head, effectively allowing you to quadruple jump.

The dungeons are all pretty short – they're meant to be beaten in less than five minutes – and there are arrows that helpfully point you in the right direction. Defeated enemies spill coloured gems, which make pleasant sounds as your team sucks them all up. But the real treat is when you hit the Fever mode, in which the whole screen lights up like a slot machine jackpot, and hitting enemies or certain blocks will cause jewels to come exploding out everywhere. At the end of each stage, it compiles the loot you've found, which lets you tweak the stats of your team.

It's pretty shallow – there's tons of equipment to find and numbers to tweak, but it doesn't feel like it matters much because the core of the game is very button-mashy. But super-hyper sensory overload hits the same dopamine triggers as Las Vegas does, without the threat of losing money. It's repetitive, but in short bursts, it's great.

Crystar

Developer: Gemdrops | Released: 2018 | Platform(s): PS4, WIN



"Sad girls in the afterlife" is the theme of this dungeon crawler.

In Gemdrops' *Crystar*, you control a girl named Rei, who's fighting through the layers of purgatory to rescue the soul of her little sister Mirai. The story is full of such tragedies, as the heroine essentially makes a deal with the devil to find her loved ones, while blaming herself for her sister's misfortune. Along the way, you meet other tormented souls, some friendly, some not, each with their own burdens. The gloomy scenario was written by Naoki Hisaya, known for the tear-jerking visual novel *Kanon*. The character artwork is by Riuchi, who hasn't worked on any other game of note, but it's easily the strongest aspect of *Crystar*.

The game has an almost depressively gloomy story. It also takes the "cry" portion of the title quite literally, as your powerful Guardian companion is strengthened by your tears, and there's a button openly dedicated to sobbing, which will leave you vulnerable while you power yourself up. Enemies also drop Memoirs of the Dead, which can be purified and equipped as stat bonuses. Between levels, where you can tune up your characters, the sole consolation is petting your fluffy dog, who is indeed a good boy.

For as thematically heavy as *Crystar* is, it's actually a fairly straightforward action-based dungeon crawler. The abstract environments, with buildings floating atop coloured skies, are pretty, but since the layouts are randomly generated, they're fairly repetitive by design. The combat is satisfying, with a variety of combos and special moves, as well as multiple playable girls, but it's also too basic to really stay interesting for the many hours the game demands. Whether the melodramatic story proves worthwhile depends on how much you dig sad girls in fantastical Gothic Lolita outfits beating up lots of bad guys.

Strategy RPGs

Board games, going back at least as far as checkers or chess, were the earliest strategy games. These eventually evolved into military-themed war-games, and these led to first computer strategy games. From a Western perspective, many of these came from Strategic Simulations Inc., with releases like 1980's *Computer Bismarck*, though other companies also specialised in them, like Avalon Hill, which also published board games. The genre really found its form in the '90s, with titles like Microprose's *Civilization*, Mythos' *X-Com: UFO Defense*, SSI's *Panzer General*, and Westwood's *Dune II*. In Japan, there were two establishing computer titles in the genre – Koei's 1983 game *Nobunaga's Ambition* (which eventually led to their more famous *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* series) and SystemSoft's 1985 release *Daisenryaku* ("Great Strategy"). While Koei's series continued for decades, it was really the latter that helped formulate the wider genre. SystemSoft continued with a fantasy version of *Daisenryaku* called *Master of Monsters*, and there were a few other similar games, like NCS' *Elthlead*, *Gaia no Monshou* ("The Crest of Gaia"), and *Guyframe/Gaiflame*, all initially released for PC platforms in the late '80s.

One particular branch, arguably the most popular in Japan, is the strategy RPG. The game which most strongly defines this is Nintendo/Intelligent Systems' *Fire Emblem*, released in 1990. What separates a mere "strategy" game from a "strategy RPG"? After all, RPGs are all about numbers, and with strategy computer games basically just simulating dice rolls, what's really the difference? As with every definition, it depends on who you ask, but generally, the biggest differentiation is story. Is there an overarching narrative? Are the characters you command faceless warriors or do they have defined names with personalities and roles in the story? And perhaps as importantly, do they develop over the course of the game, increasing in strength and gaining new abilities? These are the elements that separate *Fire Emblem* from its earlier sibling, *Famicom Wars*, otherwise fairly similar games.

Entire books can be written on the strategy-RPG genre, so the following section is more of an overview of the bigger and more interesting series. Important titles include Quest's *Tactics Ogre* (and its successor, *Final Fantasy Tactics*), Square's *Front Mission*, SEGA's *Shining Force*, *Sakura Wars*, and *Valkyria Chronicles*, NCS/Masaya's *Langrisser*, Atlus' *Growlanser* and *Devil Survivor*, and Nippon Ichi's *Disgaea*. Compared to standard RPGs, the emphasis is more on combat than narrative so their stories (with some exceptions) generally aren't as focused, and the mechanics rarely change much entry by entry, so they don't need to be examined in detail.

Tactics Ogre and its spiritual sequel, _Final Fantasy Tactics_, set the template for many strategy RPGs through the '90s and 2000s.

Fire Emblem (series)

Developer: Intelligent Systems | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): FC, SFC, GC, GBA, WII, DS, 3DS, NSW

Intelligent Systems is the part of Nintendo that developed many of its early NES titles. One of its original titles was *Famicom Wars*, released in 1988, an attempt to make hardcore PC strategy sims more palatable to a wider audience. The basic concept was refined, and given stronger story and RPG elements, resulting in the 1990 release of *Fire Emblem: Ankoku Ryuu to Hikari no Ken* for the Famicom. The story and characters were created by Shouzou Kaga, who helmed the series until his departure after the Super Famicom era.

There are 16 entries in the *Fire Emblem* series, and keeping track of them is a little confusing. None of them are officially numbered, but many are referred to using numerals by the fanbase. Some of these are true sequel sequences, sharing characters and plot elements; others are remakes of earlier games, even though they are given new numbers. The series remained Japan-only until the seventh entry (on the Game Boy Advance), subtitled *Rekka no Ken* in Japan, but released simply as *Fire Emblem* elsewhere. The series has seen ebbs and flows in terms of popularity over the years, but became an international phenomenon thanks to *Fire Emblem Awakening* (the 13th entry) for the 3DS in 2012.

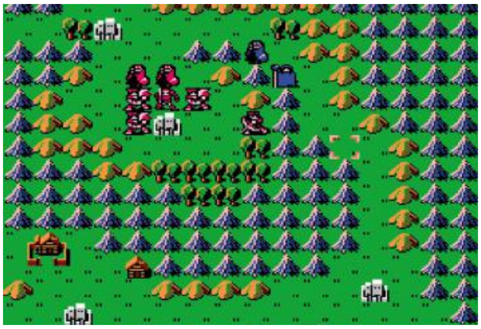
As you'd expect for a series that's been around for three decades, there have been numerous changes over the years, but many elements can be seen in most or nearly all of the games in the series. They all involve medieval fantasy worlds, filled with political strife, and have mythical creatures like dragons and pegasi. One of their defining elements is permadeath – that is, if a character is killed in battle, there is no way to resurrect them, and they are dead for the rest of the game, unless you reset, restarting that level. Obviously, for protagonists, dying will mean an immediate game over, though other plot-carrying characters can still be killed, and the story will go on, providing the player allows it. It is possible to suffer huge losses in the early part of a game and then be overwhelmed by enemy forces later on, though new characters join constantly throughout the story, replacing fallen units if needed, or sitting on the bench otherwise. Later games in the series offer a Casual mode that removes permadeath, and fallen units will simply retreat, then appear unharmed in subsequent levels.

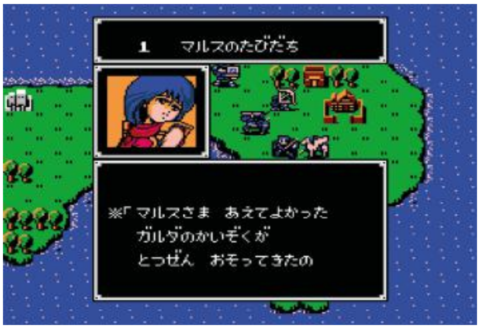
フリージ兵
57
HIT 0 DEF 5
アイラ
ひかりの剣
67
HIT 100 DEF 22

Nintendo
スーパーファミコン
ファイアーエムブレム

The fourth *Fire Emblem* game, *Seisen no Keifu*, pictured on this page, is the defining entry of the series. Yet it hasn't seen official English release.

There are several other unit types, including heavily armed units that can take a walloping but move very slowly; cavalry, which can cover large areas very quickly; healers, who can't do much damage but are essential to aid other units; and archers, who can attack from a distance. Many games also use a rock-paper-scissors-style weapon triangle, giving certain types of combatant strengths and weaknesses – sword beats axe, axe beats lance, and lance beats sword. There are other strengths and weaknesses too, depending on the unit types – for example, pegasi have enormous range and can fly over difficult terrain like mountains, but they can be easily disposed of by an archer. Magic types also have their own affinity triangles in certain games.





1 マルスのたびだち

※「マルスさま あえてよかった
ガルダのかいぞくが
とつぜん おそってきたの

Nintendo
ファイアーエムブレム
暗黒竜と光の剣

The original *Fire Emblem* for the Famicom wasn't exactly a looker, and perhaps this contributed to Nintendo's decision not to localise it. However, it received a late English localisation in 2020 on the Switch.

There's a little more to the levels than just straight combat, as there are often towns to be visited, where you can obtain information or items, or treasure chests to search out. Shopping depends on the particular entry, not all of them have shops between levels, but if they do, you may need to stop at these to replenish supplies. Weapons and spell books break after a certain number of uses, and will need to be replaced lest a unit find itself defenceless.

Units gain experience by fighting enemies, with the greatest amount of points awarded for delivering the killing blow. The scenarios have a tendency to give you at least one powerful character who can technically dispatch opponents with ease, but due to their high level, they won't advance very much, and they essentially rob other characters of that necessary growth, so you can't over-utilise them. Stats are increased randomly upon levelling up, so characters develop differently each time you play. There are level caps, though there are ways to promote or change characters into different classes, usually by obtaining and using a particular item.

The initial game on the Famicom, *Ankoku Ryuu to Hikari no Ken* ("The Shadow Dragon and Blade of Light") stars a young blue-haired man named Marth, the exiled prince of Altea, who must fight to take back his kingdom and defeat the evil dragon Medeus. Being the initial entry, on an 8-bit platform, it is pretty rough – the UI, in particular, is difficult because it does not highlight your units' movement ranges, so you need to feel it out by moving the cursor. Though the fight sequences aren't long, there's no way to skip them either. The story has a level of complexity similar to that of other RPGs of the time, but it's mostly relegated to mid-mission text, and characterisation is sparse.

The sequel, *Fire Emblem Gaiden*, suffers from some of the second instalment weirdness that affected other franchises of the day (e.g. *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*, *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*). It stars two characters, a man named Alm and a woman named Celica, who fight on the continent of Valentia, and the chapters alternate views between the two. Unlike its predecessor, in which progress was straightforward, this entry has more RPG elements, including an overworld map, and dungeons and towns to explore. Due to the recurring enemies, you can also fight, increasing your characters' levels, as much as you want, which you couldn't do in the previous game. For a long time, it was considered a bastard child of the series, since many subsequent entries tossed away these changes, but more recent entries have brought some of them back, and this second game was even completely remade for the 3DS under the title *Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows of Valentia*, so it retroactively feels a little less weird.

The third entry, *Monshou no Nazo* ("Mystery of the Emblem") saw the series move to the Super Famicom and continues the adventures of Marth and crew. In addition to this new scenario, it also includes a series of missions that are basically a remake of the first game, using the upgraded visuals and mechanics of this title. Due to ROM space limitation, some missions and characters have been cut, but it's good enough that you can play and understand it without having to revisit the Famicom game.

The fourth game, *Seisen no Keifu* ("Genealogy of the Holy War") gave another substantial shakeup to the series. It stars a new character, named Sigurd, descendent of a hero who defeated evil long ago, and heir to the holy blade Tyrfing. The game also introduces the aforementioned weapons triangle used in most of the later entries. The level structure has changed too – the first and third games each had about 30 missions, while this game cuts that number down to ten, but makes each level much longer. Since battles are longer, you can save your progress at the beginning of each turn. Previous games let units talk on the battlefield, but here, you can develop relationships between the male and female characters, and potentially have them fall in love. About halfway through the game, tragedy hits your team, and the game skips forward. A new generation of grown children continues the battle that their parents could not win.

The fifth game, *Thracia 776*, is a side story focusing on Prince Leif, one of the characters from the second generation of the previous game. The levels here are shorter and more focused, like those of the older games, and the romance options have gone, but the game is much more difficult. In addition to health, you also need to manage each character's stamina, lest they become too weak to fight.

Why are you fighting these bandits?

Bandit
Eliwood
HIT 41
DMG 7
CRT 0
Iron axe
Rapier
HIT 100
DMG 10
CRT 12
16
11

GAME BOY ADVANCE
FIRE EMBLEM

This game was originally released for the Nintendo Power cartridge download system, before seeing a retail release. It was the last game worked on by series creator Shouzou Kaga before he left Nintendo.

The series then moved to the Game Boy Advance, with *Fuuin no Tsurugi* ("The Binding Blade"), focusing on the red-haired hero Roy. It's similar to *Thracia 776,* though it removes the unpopular stamina system, and the game isn't quite as difficult. The visuals are also brighter, to compensate for the portable console's small screen. You can suspend progress in battle, but re-loading wipes that out, so you can't save scum. On its own, this entry is only middling, but it's rather important, since it indirectly sparked international interest in the series. Roy appeared with Marth in *Super Smash Bros. Melee* on the GameCube, leaving English-speaking fans wondering who these red- and blue-haired swordsmen were. Inspired by that curiosity, Nintendo began localising *Fire Emblem* games thereafter.

The next game, *Rekka no Ken* ("Blazing Sword"), known as just *Fire Emblem* without any subtitles in English, is both a prequel to the previous game, and an introduction for new players. The first several chapters put you in the role of an unseen commander, with a long tutorial given by a noblewoman named Lyn. After this prologue, the story shifts to focus on Eliwood, Roy's father. The game is similar to its direct predecessor, though with lower difficulty.

The final Game Boy Advance game is *Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones,* which moves away from the story of Roy and Eliwood, and instead focuses on twins named Eirika and Ephraim. This entry borrows some elements from *Fire Emblem Gaiden,* including the dual perspectives of the heroes, and the ability to travel around on a world map, and with that, the ability to fight and grind at your leisure.

The series then returned to consoles with *Path of Radiance* for the GameCube, focusing on the mercenary Ike. The visuals are all rendered polygons, though rather unimpressive, and the music quality has improved. The biggest change to the game is the inclusion of beast-like creatures called Laguz, which can transform in battle. The direct sequel, *Radiant Dawn,* appeared on the Wii. The story initially focused on the white-haired maiden Micaiah, before eventually joining up with Ike and crew. This entry was also made for series veterans, as the difficulty level is quite high. The international released toned things down a bit, and even added the ability to save progress mid-battle.

The next two entries went to the DS, and both are remakes of earlier games. *Shadow Dragon* is a retelling of the first game, finally introducing English-speaking gamers to Marth and crew. The mechanics are all updated to match the newer games (including the weapon triangle) and a few prologue chapters have been added. There are also new characters, though they only exist to replace fallen ones. However, the game is quite ugly, with a dull colour palette and terrible-looking CG-rendered sprites. Some artwork was provided by Masamune Shirow (*Ghost in the Shell*), though this is not used in-game. The follow-up, *Shin Monshou no Nazo* ("New Mystery of the Emblem") is a remake of the third game (the first Super Famicom entry, continuing the story of Marth) and was not released outside of Japan. It does introduce a few elements continued in later games, like the Casual Mode that gets rid of permadeath, and the My Unit user-created character, who has several new chapters devoted to them.

The DS games were not particularly popular, but Nintendo gave it another go on the 3DS with *Awakening.* Again, the hero is technically the user-created avatar My Unit (default name: Robin),

The first *Fire Emblem* game to make it overseas is the one pictured on this page, technically the seventh in the series, for the Game Boy Advance. Thank *Super Smash Bros. Melee* for that.

***Fire Emblem Awakening* rejuvenated the series, largely because the player could pair up their favourite warriors and have them make a (full-grown) kid.**

FIRE EMBLEM
Awakening
NINTENDO 3DS

but the protagonist is actually Chrom, the descendent of Marth. In addition to the return of Casual Mode, you can again venture around a map to play non-story battles. The polygonal visuals are nicer than on the GameCube, despite the lower resolution.

Probably the biggest reason for the game's success was the return of relationship building, last seen in *Seisen no Keifu*. While there's no time-skipping here, magical shenanigans enables the children of the married couples to time-travel to the current era and join their parents. There's also quite a bit of DLC that references past games.

With the series revived, the *Fire Emblem* team moved onto more ambitious projects with *Fire Emblem Fates*. Focusing on a young prince/princess (another player avatar, default name Corrin), who must choose which kingdom to fight for, Nohr or Hoshido. There are technically three different scenarios, with two retail releases, the idea being that you'd buy one of them, and then purchase the remaining two as DLC. This sort of recalls the multiple scenarios of SEGA/Camelot's *Shining Force III*, but the execution here is rather poor. The writers were clearly stretched too thin, and while *Fire Emblem* games aren't really known for their plots, here they're worse than usual. In particular, Hoshido are obviously the good guys, while the Nohr are the bad guys, without much in the way of shades of grey.

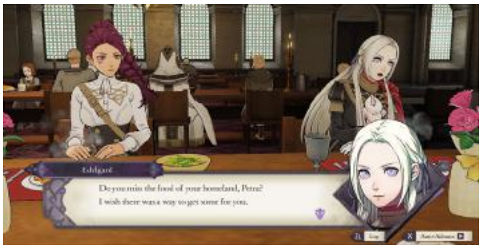
The game itself is generally an improvement over *Awakening*, with a castle that you can customise. The weapon "triangle" has been expanded to include different types of weapons, and they no longer break either. Players can also bring chosen characters back to their private quarters for meetings. The Japanese version gave close-ups on their faces, which you could touch with the stylus, something so weird and alienating it was removed from the English versions.

The final 3DS game, *Shadows of Valentia*, is a remake of the second title, *Fire Emblem Gaiden*, focusing on the heroes Alm and Celica. This being a throwback, it's missing the romance elements and the avatar characters of the other 3DS games. While the DS remakes retroactively added some more modern *Fire Emblem* mechanics, this one really doesn't, as it doesn't use the weapon triangle. It keeps some of its more unique traits (like archers being able to attack at close range) as well as the dungeon crawling. Due to the reliance on random variables, there's a Turnwheel that, within limits, can be used to reverse time. The plot has been greatly expanded and the supporting cast greatly fleshed out, with much more voice acting. While its mission design feels dated, anyone who was put off by the modern *Fire Emblem* games will probably like this one.

The series then moved to the Switch, with *Three Houses*. Taking a note from *Persona* and *Trails of Cold Steel*, it mostly takes place in a school setting, here a war academy. Rather than being a student, though, you're a teacher, and can choose how to spend your time around campus, attending activities or hanging out with students. As the title suggests, there are three houses to choose from, each with its own students, and a fourth house obtainable as DLC. Since relationship building is the focus of the game, more emphasis is placed on the characters here than in most other entries. The story also includes a time skip, so you can see how your classmates develop. Due to the social elements, the battles aren't quite as difficult, though some added features include Battalions, or hired mercenaries that fight alongside your characters. The weapon triangle was also ditched in favour of other weapon strengths-weaknesses.

As usual with these long-running series, there's no real "best" entry, with most favourites coming down to preference. *Seisen no Keifu* is best of the classic 16-bit games, *Path of Radiance* is generally regarded as the strongest of the following generation, and *Three Houses* is the preferred game out of the more gentle, modern entries. The series has shown no evidence of stopping, especially as Nintendo continues to add new characters to the *Super Smash Bros.* games.

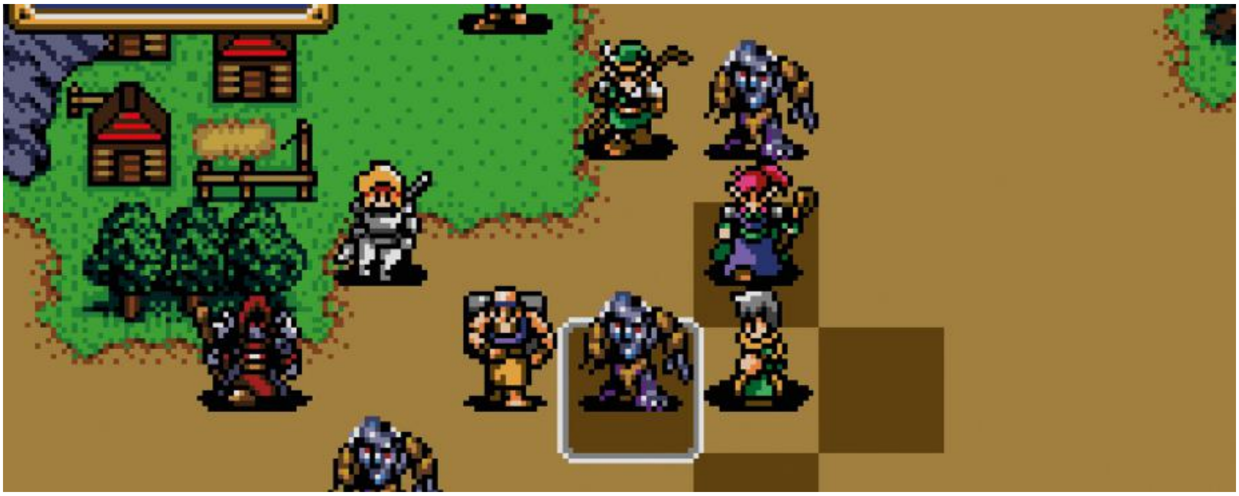
While not officially part of the series, it's also well worth looking into the *Tearring Saga* games, the titles created by Shouzou Kaga after leaving Intelligent Systems and forming his own company, Tirananog. The first entry, released in 2001 for the PlayStation, has almost identical gameplay, the same interface, and even the same character artist. It's styled after *Fire Emblem Gaiden*, with its two heroes commanding different armies, and a map screen to follow. Its original name was also *Emblem Saga*; that was such a huge rip-off that they were actually sued by Nintendo, and while publisher Enterbrain was ordered to pay damages, game sales were permitted to continue. In other words, it may as well be considered part of the series due to its lineage. Its sequel, *Berwick Saga* for the PlayStation 2, changes this system so it feels less like a clone, including a switch from square to hexagonal tiles.



Do you miss the food of your homeland, Petra?
I wish there was a way to get some for you.

FIRE EMBLEM
THREE HOUSES

***Three Houses* features character artwork by Chinatsu Kurahana, known for her work on *Uta no Prince-sama*, a multimedia franchise focusing on a boy idol band. It's quite a bit more stylish than that of other games in the series.**



Shining Force (series)

Developer: Sonic! Software/Camelot | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): GEN, SCD, GG, SAT, GBA

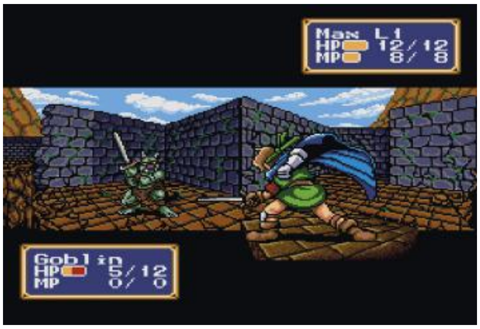
Nintendo/Intelligent System's *Fire Emblem* was the pre-eminent strategy RPG, but the cumbersome interface, high difficulty, and political storylines meant that it was really reserved for a hardcore audience. SEGA's *Shining Force* was a counterpoint to this, being a very similar type of game but created to be more approachable, in a number of ways. It was doubly important for Western gamers since, unlike Nintendo with *Fire Emblem*, SEGA supported the series outside of Japan, at least during the 16-bit era, making it many English speakers' first exposure to this type of game.

The initial entry was developed by Sonic! Software Planning (no relation to Sonic Team, the developers of the *Sonic the Hedgehog* games), as a follow-up to their Genesis dungeon-crawler *Shining in the Darkness*. It has a very similar style, including the fairytale storybook fantasy setting, and visual connections between the two can be spotted immediately, even though the plots aren't directly related. It was designed by Hiroyuki Takahashi, with character artwork by Yoshitaka Tamaki; music in the first game was by Masahiko Yoshimura and in the second game by Motoaki Takenouchi.

Shining Force opens with a young girl reading a book, who registers your name and then sends you off to start the adventure proper. You control a young man, default name Max, as he protects the Kingdom of Guardiana from the invading forces of Runefaust, which seeks to resurrect the Dark Dragon. While fighting off their hordes, Max must recruit members for the titular Shining Force, eventually expanding their ranks from a ragtag group of kids to a legitimate army.

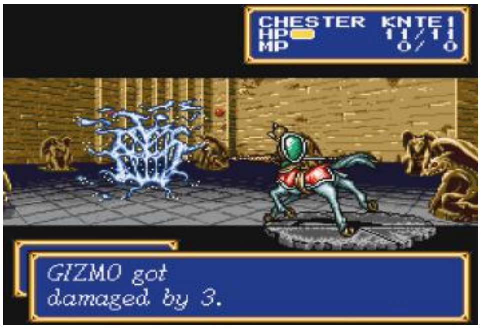
Strategy-RPGs like *Fire Emblem* are typically defined as tactical games with role-playing elements, but *Shining Force* flips the script a bit, as it's more like a role-playing game with tactical elements. Rather than having missions foisted on you, players are free to explore towns, talk to people, buy weapons and so forth, before moving on to the battle scenes to advance the story. The towns are also linked with an overworld, which is also the scene for many fights. There are several different character classes, including the usual fighters, archers, priests and mages, while knights are generally centaurs, and there are other anthropomorphic characters as well. As with *Fire Emblem*, units can be promoted to a more advanced class when they hit a certain level. Some join as part of the story, while others need to be actively recruited. One of the most amusing is a little hamster-type creature named Jogurt, who isn't much use in combat but sure is cute.

Combat is very similar to that in *Fire Emblem*; the most striking difference is how much better it looks. The view is zoomed in closer, so both the scenery and the characters are larger, making them more distinct, and the interface is much easier to understand too. During battles, the viewpoint switches to a dramatic over-the-shoulder view, presented in letterbox as if it were

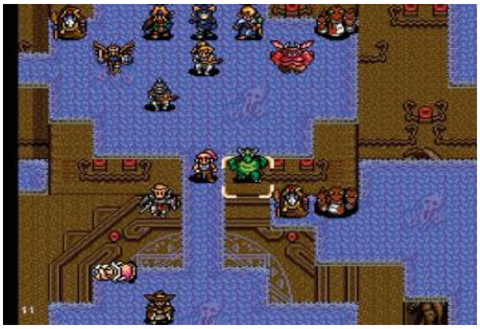


GENESIS
SEGA
SHINING FORCE

Visuals were rarely a key feature of the *Fire Emblem* games, but *Shining Force* featured both an intriguing art style and gorgeous battle scenes.



GIZMO got damaged by 3.



GENESIS
SHINING FORCE II

Shining Force II is not a drastic change from its predecessor, but it is more refined.

a movie, as the combatant attacks their foe. While the animation is simple, visually it's so much more impressive than the little figures in the earlier *Fire Emblem* games. Indeed, these images were featured prominently in advertisements, and helped sell the game to an international audience that was believed to have been averse to role-playing games.

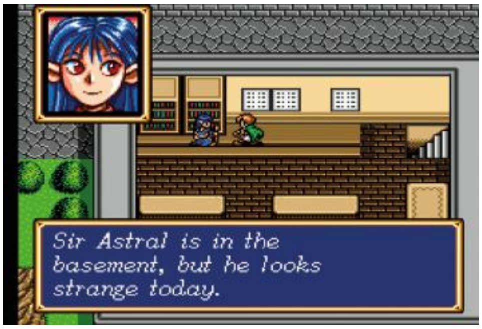
Various other elements make it quite a bit easier too. There is no permadeath, so defeated characters are available for subsequent battles, and you can maintain your experience after getting wiped, giving you a chance to level up through repeated encounters. Terrain still has an effect on stats, though counter-attacks, generally a given in *Fire Emblem*, are much rarer and occur randomly. Character turns are also determined via their speed stats rather than the sides alternating in discrete turns, though there is some element of randomness to it, and you can't tell ahead of time who will act. While the game overall is certainly not as difficult as any *Fire Emblem*, it doesn't mean it's easy either – allies can easily become overwhelmed, and a few careless moves can still spell defeat.

Shining Force became an almost instant classic, and helped bolster the Genesis' RPG line-up. In 2004 it received a remake for the Game Boy Advance called *Shining Force: Resurrection of the Dark Dragon*, with redone graphics and assorted tweaks to make it easier to play. This port was developed by Amusement Vision, a team within SEGA, rather than the original developers.

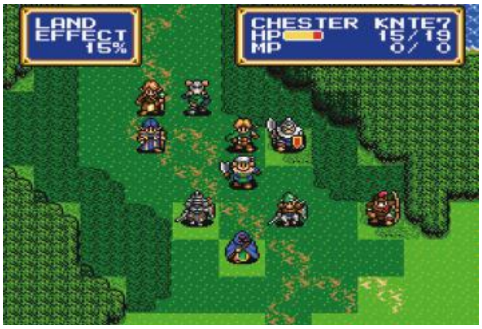
Shining Force II was a quick follow-up which looks more or less the same at the outset, but has a number of subtle improvements. The story this time involves a seal that has been broken, unleashing the demon king Zeon onto the land of Granseal, and the player controls a young man named Bowie, who forms a new Shining Force to stop him. It's a little longer and more involved, though also much chattier. The interface has seen some improvements that make item juggling less cumbersome (among other things), and exploration is a little more open-ended, as you can backtrack to previous areas instead of being railroaded through chapters like the first game. The class promotion is a little more flexible too, and there are even alternate classes available to certain characters, provided you can find the proper items. While not a massive change, it's generally regarded as very slightly the better of the two Genesis games.

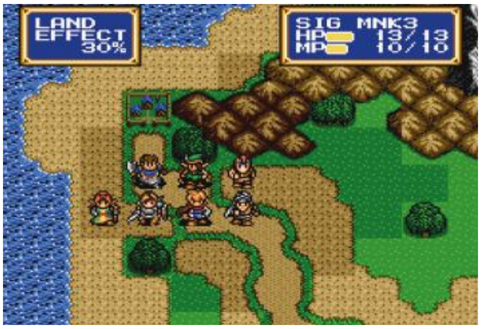
SEGA created a *Gaiden* spinoff series for the Game Gear, beginning with *Ensei: Jashin no Kuni e* ("Expedition: To The Kingdom of the Evil God", unreleased in the English) and *Jashin no Mezame* (localised as *The Sword of Hajya*). These are meant to bridge the stories in the first and second Genesis games. They were later compiled together for SEGA CD, released internationally as *Shining Force CD*, bringing the interface and visuals into line with those of the 16-bit games, and including a CD audio soundtrack. There are two extra scenarios to be unlocked as well, though due to the larger memory space required, they require a Backup RAM cartridge to unlock. The story actually continues with a third Game Gear game, subtitled *Final Conflict*, though this has never been officially translated in any form.

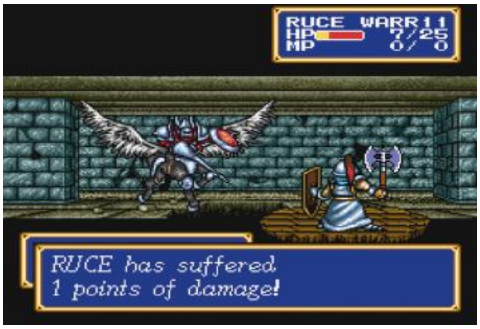
The third *Shining Force* arrived on the Saturn, and marks a true evolution of the series. It was divided up into three separate releases,



Sir Astral is in the basement, but he looks strange today.







RUCE has suffered
1 points of damage!

SEGA CD
SHINING FORCE
CD
SEGA

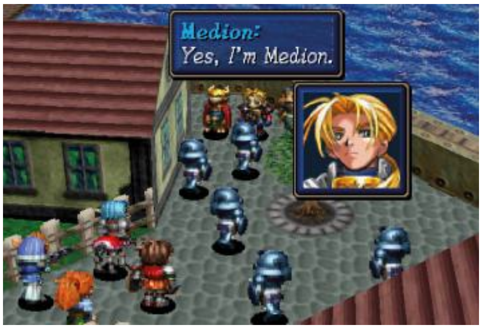
Shining Force CD **is basically a compilation of two Game Gear games, now visually on par with the Genesis ones, and with redbook music.**

with completely different scenarios, which focus on various factions with their own leaders: the first stars Synbios of the Republic of Aspinia, the second Medion, Prince of Destonia, and the third featuring Julian, an unaffiliated mercenary. The story initially concerns the war between the two kingdoms, though the true manipulator is actually the nefarious Bulzome Sect. It's also connected directly to the events of *Shining the Holy Ark*. Some events, in which the characters' paths cross, are shown from different perspectives in different releases. Some choices made in one scenario can also affect another, though the effects of this aren't terribly large. Unfortunately, the biggest downside of *Shining Force III* has less to do with its contents and more to do with its release. The English version came as SEGA was beginning to pull the plug on the Saturn outside of Japan, so only the first entry was localised, leaving the story incomplete.

From a gameplay perspective, it's similar to the Genesis games, though it borrows a few elements from *Fire Emblem*, particularly the capacity of characters to develop bonds when fighting next to each other in combat, improving their abilities. Some maps have secondary, typically hidden areas, where you can split your party up, and try to hunt for extra items.

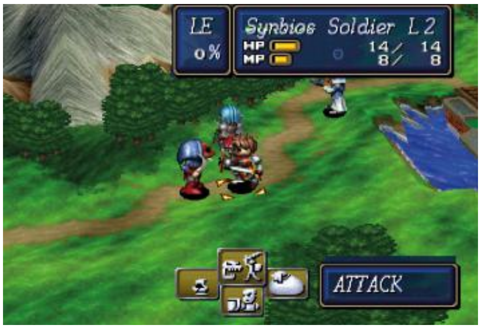
The graphics are now entirely in 3D, though this was never the Saturn's strong point. The sprites are CG-rendered on the maps and don't look great, though since the field is made with polygons, you can rotate the camera at will. Less impressive are the battle scenes, which are totally 3D and ... are really rather ugly. They're certainly better animated than in the Genesis days, but they look markedly worse than those in the PlayStation's better titles of the late '90s, and have aged terribly over the years. Plus, they include digitised battle cries, which were fine in Japanese but sound embarrassingly bad in English. The soundtrack is by composer Motoi Sakuraba, who had also supplied the music to *Shining the Holy Ark*. The soundtrack to *Shining Force III* is similarly outstanding, with leitmotifs built into town and battle themes.

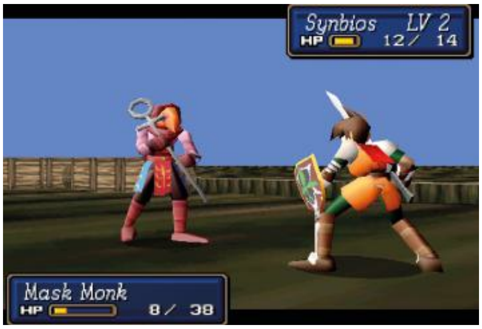
The *Shining Force* series technically didn't end here, but the development team, which had rebranded as Camelot by the time of the third game's release, was growing impatient with SEGA and had begun working with other publishers. They eventually linked up with Nintendo, for which they created their own original RPG series, *Golden Sun*, and assorted Mario sports games. Meanwhile, SEGA continued the *Shining* label as a sort of general RPG franchise, but most of these later games weren't strategy-RPGs, and indeed barely resembled anything from the original developers. As a result, there are cries from many fans who still wish for a proper return to the olden days of *Shining Force*.



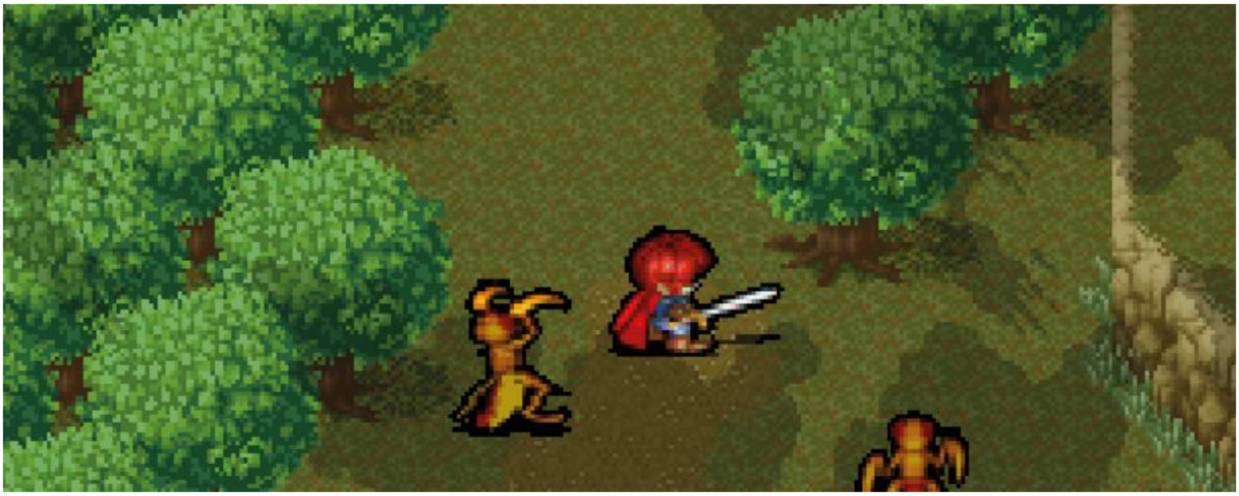
Medion:
Yes, I'm Medion.

The second and third scenarios of *Shining Force III* were not released outside of Japan, leaving North America and Europe with only one third of the story.





SEGA
SEGA SATURN
SHINING FORCE III



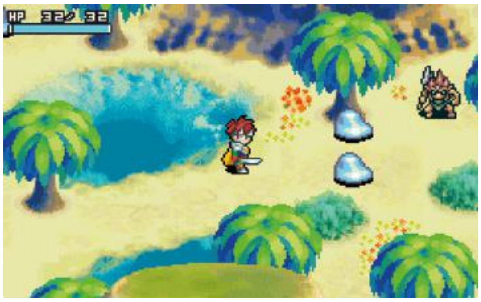
Shining (series)

Developer: assorted companies | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SAT, GBA, PSP, DS, PS2, PS3 and more

The *Shining* series began with the first-person dungeon crawler *Shining in the Darkness, and* later *Shining the Holy Ark,* then spun off to the SRPG *Shining Force*. While many Western players associate the *Shining* name with strategy games, it quickly became a catch-all RPG brand for SEGA, with numerous types of release from different developers across various sub-genres.

The first of these was *Shining Wisdom* for the Saturn, the only of these *Shining* spinoffs developed by Sonic! Software Planning, the original team. It's an overhead action RPG starring a squire named Mars, who must stop the wizard Pazort from summoning an evil giant and destroying the world. It's similar to previous games from SEGA, like *Crusader of Centy*, complete with an emphasis on overworld and dungeon exploration, along with simple puzzle solving.

The central gimmick is that the player can dash by hammering the B button, allowing the character to run very fast. There are a few amusing items, like a judo suit that lets you throw enemies around, spring shoes which allow you to jump, and even a car! And it maintains the same storybook-style narrative as the 16-bit *Shining* games, even being a bit sillier. But everything else about this game is middling to poor. The sprites are CG-rendered, with thick black borders, and they look terrible. Even the colour scheme through much of the game is ugly, and in the end, looks worse than in many 16-bit games. Your default sword is too small (though some of the other weapons/abilities help make up for it), and everything feels clumsy and awkward. The American Saturn release was translated by Working Designs, which changes up some names and messes up some links with the main *Shining* series; the European version has an English translation that's more faithful to the original.

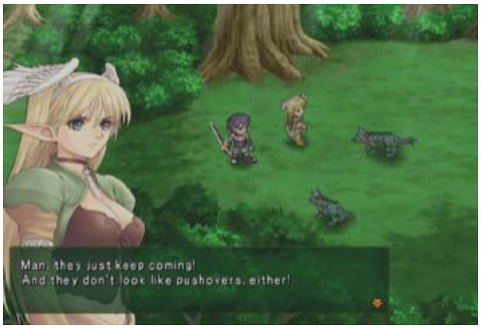


SEGA SATURN
Shining Wisdom

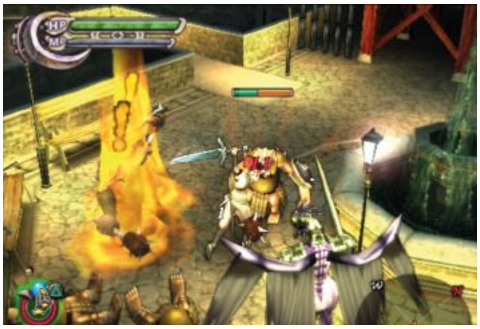
The *Shining* series veered into action RPG territory, first with Camelot's *Shining Wisdom* (top and above) and Nextech/ Grasshopper's *Shining Soul* (above left).

This action RPG style set down the rough template for the next few *Shining* games, after the Saturn era. The next series, *Shining Soul,* began in 2002, for the Game Boy Advance, developed by Nextech (*Crusader of Centy*) and Grasshopper Manufacture. It keeps the same frame story, of a girl reading a book, maintains the familiar menus, and roughly ties in with the story of defeating a Dark Dragon, but otherwise, it feels quite a bit different from the Camelot entries. Rather than taking after *Zelda,* or any other 16-bit action RPG, this series is closer to a hack-and-slash à la *Diablo*, just made for a younger audience. You pick your character class (out of four in the first game, eight in the second), then fight through dungeons and pick up loot from fallen enemies. Unlike *Diablo*'s, its areas are not randomly generated. It also supports multiplayer via link cable. The games are fairly simple and rather tedious, plus the action is a little frustrating, since attacks are basically dice rolls, so many moves can "miss" even if they connect.

Nextech was also in charge of the next sub-series of *Shining* games, the first being *Shining Tears*, published in 2007 for the PlayStation 2, followed up by its sequel *Shining Wind* in 2009.



Man, they just keep coming!
And they don't look like pushovers, either!



PlayStation 2
Shining Force
SEGA

The series then split off into two separate action-RPG directions: the 2D entries, with artwork by Tony Taka, and the 3D entries, developed by Neverland.

This began the line of *Shining* games with artwork by Tony Taka, a well-regarded illustrator who was at the time known for adult games like *Fault!!* and *Sora no Iro, Mizu no Iro*. But he's also very skilled at fantasy artwork, here producing a wide variety of attractive characters of different races, including humans, elves, and beastfolk. However, the art really is the main appeal of these games, because the games themselves are very inconsistent, to the point where some Japanese fans felt that the Tony *Shining* entries were made more to sell figures or artbooks than to create games.

Shining Tears and *Wind* are also unusual for PlayStation 2 games in that they're entirely displayed in high definition (480i) 2D visuals with pleasant, watercolour-style, painted backgrounds, though they suffer from poor animation and frame rate, as well as long load times. Indeed, they look very pretty, but they're very simple and aren't much fun to actually play.

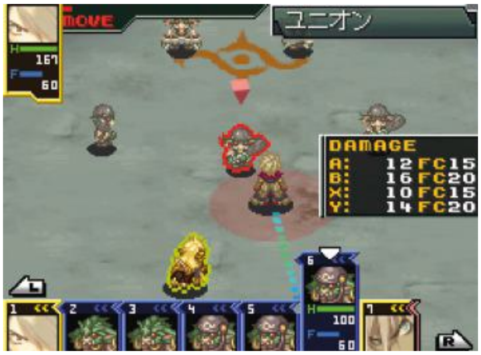
The story of *Shining Tears* focuses on a boy named Xion, who washes up on a shore without any memory, but possessing a pair of strange rings. There are eight different characters you can partner up with, including the elven archer girl Elwyn and the icy witch Neige, with unique endings based on your favoured character. *Shining Wind* focuses on characters called Soul Bladers, who can use their partners' hearts as swords. One such Soul Blader is Kaito, the protagonist. The stories are fairly typical fantasy stuff, though they play a bigger role than they did in the *Soul* series. *Shining Tears* was released in North America but *Shining Wind* was not. In 2007, there was an anime TV series based on these games, called *Shining Tears X Wind*, which features some original characters from the "real" world. Parts of *Shining Wind*'s story are difficult to understand unless you also watch the anime.

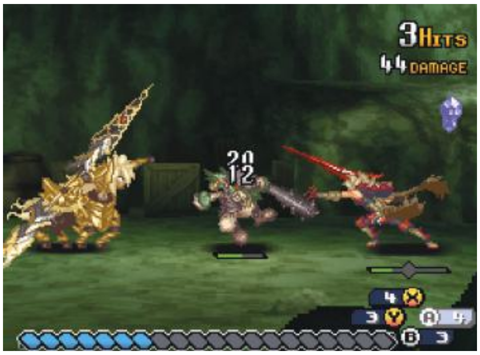
From a gameplay standpoint, these are evolutions of the *Shining Soul* games, with a few main differences. For starters, you're in charge of two different characters, the primary character controlled using the left analogue stick, while the secondary can be either AI-guided, or controlled using the right stick. If positioned correctly, this pair can perform combo link attacks. The game also reels back the dungeon exploration and focuses on just killing lots of bad guys in small areas, giving it a feel sort of like a 2D version of Koei's *Musou* (*Dynasty Warriors*) series.

There was another series of *Shining* games released for the PlayStation 2, this time developed by Neverland. They're also hack-and-slash games, based on their *Record of Lodoss War* Dreamcast RPG. However, unlike *Tears/Wind*, they have entirely 3D visuals. Both games feature different character artists: the first, *Shining Force Neo*, has art by Yuriko Nishiyama, and the second, *Shining Force EXA*, has art by Pako. Both of these games were released in North America.

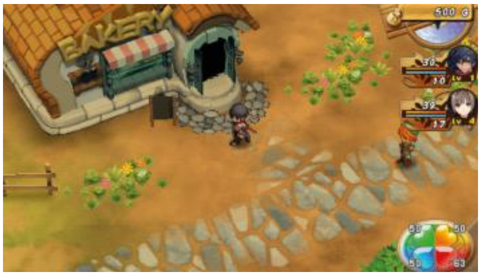
These games are less constrained than *Tears/Wind* in their design, and less focused on missions and more on sprawling arenas where you run around, hack stuff up, and find loot. In addition to a main character, whom you can upgrade and customise in various ways, you're usually joined by two partners of your choosing. There is a wide variety of characters of different races, including wolf-like beastmen, winged birdmen (and birdwomen), centaurs, and even a robot and a baby

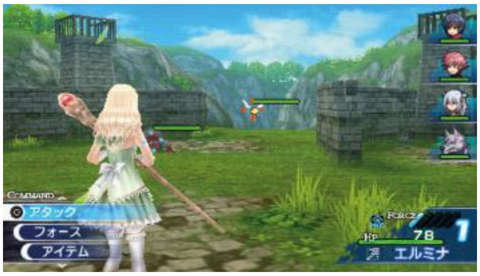
In response to the calls of strategy-RPG fans, the DS entry, *Shining Force Feather*, was developed by Flight-Plan, known for the *Summon Night* series.





NINTENDO DS
Shining Force Feather





PSP
Shining Hearts
SEGA

There are three *Shining* games for the PSP – *Shining Hearts* (above far left screenshot and box art above), a life-sim RPG, and two SRPGs, *Shining Blade* (above left) and *Shining Ark*.

dragon. Unlike in *Tears/Wind*, you can't control them directly: they're governed by AI.

Shining Force Neo stars a character named Max, though it's a completely different Max from the one in the original Genesis game. In *Shining Force EXA*, the main characters are a boy named Toma and a girl named Cyrille. The latter game also includes a customisable mechanical castle called the Geo-Fortress. Despite being mechanically similar games, their stories are unrelated. While they are hardly stellar, the action feels much more satisfying than in the Tony Taka games, so they end up being more fun, even if they're still a bit repetitive. The wide selection of partner characters of different races and types also makes them feel a little closer to the 16-bit games, even though they play nothing like them.

Some of the next few games return to the series' SRPG roots, though they're still quite different from the 16-bit games. The first of these is *Shining Force Feather* for the 3DS. This was developed by Flight-Plan, known for its *Summon Night* series of SRPGs, and features art by Pako, who also did the illustrations for *Shining Force EXA*, along with another artist, Noizi Ito.

The game takes place several millennia after a huge battle against beings called the Kyomu. The ruins created by this war still draw treasure hunters, including the hero, Jin, who discovers and activates an ancient android girl named Alfin, who joins in for more adventures.

While you can walk around the airship that functions as your base, there are no towns or overworlds to explore: you just jump from scenario to scenario. The battle system is completely different from that of the old days, removing the movement grid and instead giving you a circular radius to indicate how far you can move. Each character has a Force meter, which determines how many attacks they can perform, and regenerates a bit after each turn. When combat begins, you're switched to a side-view perspective. When on the offensive, if you hit the button with the correct timing you can activate extra damage, then choose from a variety of attacks, which can inflect elemental damage. When defending, you can also time button presses to regain either HP or Force. Multiple characters can also join in for union attacks. While unique in concept, in practice, it's kinda boring. Most SRPGs require that you use the terrain to your advantage, but here, most of the maps are just flat open plains, and the emphasis is more on resource and character management. While the game was liked among Japanese fans for its fun character banter, something Flight-Plan was known for, otherwise it's fairly average.

The Tony *Shining* games continued with a trilogy on the PSP, which was Japan-only. *Shining Hearts* was the first instalment, released in 2010. Developed by Studio Saizensen, it's actually a spiritual successor to their earlier PlayStation game, *Doki Doki Poyacchio*. The main character in this one is a swordsman named Rick, who has taken up odd jobs on the island of Wyndaria. One day a mysterious girl named Kaguya, who has lost her memory, is washed ashore; naturally, Rick comes to her rescue. Though Kaguya is technically the main heroine, you can also pick from one of three partners – Amir, Neris, or Airy – though other than their character designs, there's not much difference between them.

Much of the game is spent running various sub-quests, which grant you hearts of four different colours, which are the keys to advancing the story. There's also the MOE (Mind Over Emotion) system, which is basically identical to the LIPS from *Sakura Wars*, in that you're given a short amount of time to respond to dialogue questions. You can go fishing, you can go sailing, you can go foraging. It's not an action RPG, unlike the previous *Shining* games, and has a more traditional JRPG turn-based battle system. Since Rick works at a bakery and often does deliveries, there's a whole system in place for baking bread.

Shining Hearts defines itself as a "slow-life RPG". It's visuals and music are pleasant, particularly due to the soundtrack by Hiroki Kikuta (*Secret of Mana*), but movement is sluggish, the battles are tedious, and load times are long – the game is supposed to be relaxing, but it may be more liable to put you to sleep. An anime adaptation was also released, called *Shining Hearts: Bread of Happiness*.

The second PSP game, *Shining Blade*, is another SRPG, and again focuses on Soul Bladers, as in *Shining Wind*. The hero is Rage, a human who was summoned from another world, and wields a sword named Yukihime, which possesses the spirit of a woman. Other characters from the previous Tony *Shining* series make appearances as well. With the party he assembles, Rage fights back against the evil Dragonia Empire.

Kirika
That may be so, but His Radiance has blessed us with his sublime presence... His holy splendor

While most of the Tony *Shining* series stayed in Japan, SEGA did bring over *Shining Resonance Refrain*, an HD port of a game originally released on the PlayStation 3.

Shining Blade was developed by Media. Vision, the same company as developed all of the *Valkyria Chronicles* games after the second one. As such, it actually uses a nearly identical battle system, referred to as BLiTZ (Battle of Live Tactical Zones). At the beginning of each turn, you're presented with an overhead-view map, with icons showing your player characters and the enemies. When you choose to move on, the view zooms down and goes 3D, and you directly control the character on the battlefield. There are a few types of weapon, including mêlée gear, bows and arrows, and magic. If another character is in range, you can also have them link attacks, or call the units to walk together. There are Force special moves, based on a gauge that increases over the course of battle. Additionally, there are Diva characters who can provide aid through song, though they can't perform any other actions when they're singing.

It's a solid system, but it's also a bit on the easy side. The story is also pretty repetitive and not all that interesting. As in the PS2 games, there is a Likeability stat that determines your relationships with the other characters, which can affect the ending. The visuals are quite pretty and the music is decent, and the game's certainly of better quality than most that preceded it.

This was followed up by the third and final PSP game, *Shining Ark*. The story set-up, however, is very similar to that in *Hearts*. It takes place on the mostly deserted island of Arcadia, where a village boy named Fried discovers a girl washed up on the shores. Her name is Panis, she has a single black wing on her back, and she's lost her memory. Shortly after, a red moon appears on the sky, and the island is attacked by giants. Only Panis' songs can quell them.

The game is another SRPG, mechanically pretty similar to *Blade*. The main difference is that in *Blade*, you could pick which characters to move, but here, turn order is determined by character and enemy speed stats, as in *Final Fantasy Tactics*. The difficulty is a little higher (there are both casual and standard levels) but there are other issues – namely, you can only take four characters instead of five into battle, and one of those is always Panis, so in reality you can only pick three. And then there's Panis herself, who talks like a cute, innocent little girl despite being at least a teenager, and is incredibly obnoxious. While *Blade* offered the ability to romance the other heroines, here Panis is the sole object of Fried's affections. So in some ways, the game is an improvement, but in others, it's a step backwards.

These then led into the sole HD game, *Shining Resonance*, released in 2014 for the PlayStation 3. The hero in this game is a young man named Yuma, who holds within him the power of the Shining Dragon. He can take on the monstrous form of this beast, though he can't always control it. He is drafted into a war between the kingdom of Astoria and its rival, Empire of Lombardia.

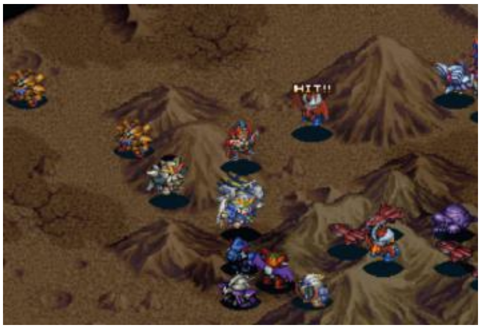
The game is a more traditional JRPG, and plays much like a Namco *Tales* game, right down to the action-based battles, in which you control a single character, while the rest of the party is governed by AI. The characters' weapons are based on musical instruments, and provided they can charge up the party's super meter, can activate a BAND performance, triggering a vocal song and giving perks in combat, like the songs from *Blade* and *Ark*. There are also events that strengthen the emotional bonds between the hero and the other party members, which is an element typical of the Tony *Shining* games.

The attractive character designs look quite nice rendered in 3D, though the environments are fairly bland. The vocal themes are forgettable J-pop, but the rest of the soundtrack has a pleasant Celtic feel. From a gameplay perspective, the difficulty curve is unbalanced, and you're forced to travel through the same boring areas repeatedly. The story is typical anime fantasy stuff, resulting in a pleasant if somewhat derivative game. Initially confined to Japan, a remade version dubbed *Shining Resonance Refrain* was released internationally in 2018 for Windows, PlayStation 4 and Switch. This includes all of the DLC from the PS3 release, plus two additional playable characters in the optional Refrain mode.

The *Shining* series didn't completely stick to RPGs either, as the Tony *Shining* characters were used as the centrepiece of the 2D fighting game *Blade Arcus from Shining*. Developed by Studio Saizensen (who previously did *Shining Hearts*, and later made the fighting game *Blade Strangers*), it features a couple of new characters, but the cast is mostly the crew from *Hearts*, *Blade*, *Arc*, and *Resonance*. This version was actually released internationally on Steam, though none of the earlier games had been localised at the time of release in 2016. An enhanced version, subtitled *Rebellion*, was later released for the PS4, but only in Japan, including four extra characters from *Resonance*.

Super Robot Wars (series)

Developer: Winkysoft/assorted companies | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): GB, FC, SFC, PS1 and more



SUPER ROBOT WARS F FINAL

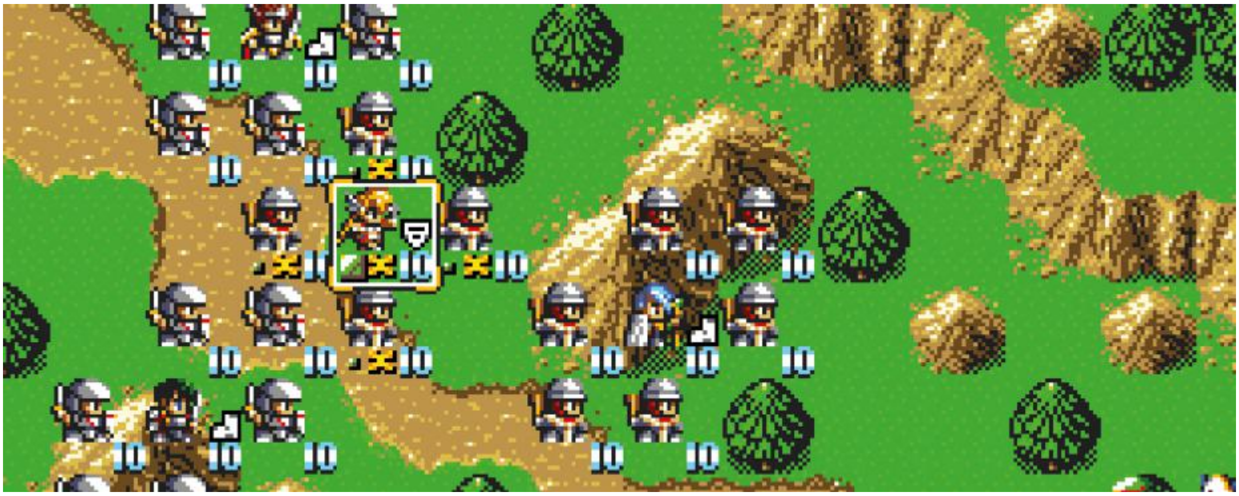
The SRPG gameplay in *Super Robot Wars* is relatively simple, but it's the best place for crazy crossovers between assorted franchises, even including mecha anime, special effects-driven live-action films (tokusatsu), and monster movies (kaijuu) in their ranks.

Banpresto's *Super Robot Wars* series started in 1991 with a Game Boy title. Originally developed by Winkysoft, the franchise currently stands at over 55 games. It's all about giant robots and pilots, from mecha anime old and new, coming together to take on all manner of foes, usually with the fate of the world or universe at stake. Represented series include the "Holy Trinity" (*Mobile Suit Gundam*, *Getter Robo*, *Mazinger*), fan favourites (*GaoGaiGar*, *Dancouga*, *Macross*), and some forgotten one-offs (*Mechander Robo*, *GoLion*, *Jushin Liger*). *UX* for the 3DS (2013) even featured vocaloid Hatsune Miku, while 2015's *X-Ω* (Cross-Omega) for mobile has included everything from *Super Sentai* to *Godzilla!*

In terms of gameplay, *SRW* generally follows the basic SRPG style, i.e. moving units across a grid-based battlefield to engage enemies, with each side having its own turn to move and/or attack. Player units also have access to Spirit Commands, the game's equivalent to spells, which can enable, for example, evasion of a single attack, healing of another unit, or single-turn power-ups for offence or defence. The original game focused on conquering an enemy base, but all subsequent games feature various objectives. In between battles, you can upgrade individual units' stats or attacks, and equip items to further increase stats; some games even allow you to upgrade the pilots themselves. A few entries did make changes, though, like putting units into pairs or creating squads of four (at most), while those not considered mainline entries have tried other genres entirely, like real-time strategy (*Scramble Commander*), monster-raising (*Link Battler*), card-battling (*Card Chronicle*), & tower defence (*X-Ω*).

To be fair, *SRW* games aren't exactly the ones to play if you want deep SRPG gameplay, and difficulty has generally been toned down ever since Winkysoft stopped making them, after *F Final* in 1998. Really, *SRW* games primarily offer the joy of seeing events only possible via crossover, like having the casts of *RahXephon*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and *Brave Raideen* meet up, hiring the services of the cast of *Cowboy Bebop* or *Galaxy Cyclone Braiger*'s J9, seeing Captain Harlock fight alongside the Gunbuster, or even preventing characters from dying, as they did in their source stories. The cutscenes of the mechas executing attacks, accompanied by the yells of their pilots, are always a rush, too. A few games even had themed rosters, like the '80s (*GC/XO*), kids-focused '90s anime (*Neo*), or super-obscure series (*Compact 3*). In 2002, Banpresto even launched the *Original Generation* series, which brings all the original characters together, in one universe, without any licences.

Due to said licensing, only three *Original Generation* games saw release in America and Europe. Ever since 2016, though, Bandai Namco has produced English releases of the latest console games for Asian markets (*OG: The Moon Dwellers*, *V*, *X*, and *T*), and there are fan translations for some of the pre-2016 games.

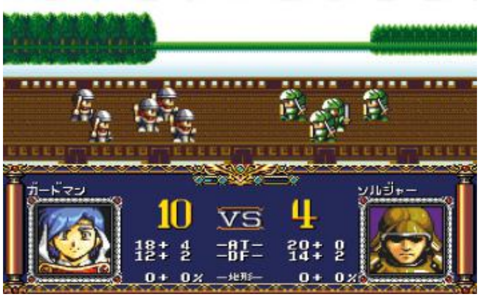


Langrisser (series)

Developer: Masaya/Career Soft | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): GEN, SFC, PCE, PCFX, PS1, SAT and more

Alongside Nintendo's *Fire Emblem* and SEGA's *Shining Force*, one of the most popular SRPG series of the 16-bit era was Masaya's *Langrisser*. The high fantasy storylines are pretty typical; all of the games revolve around the holy sword Langrisser and its counterpart, the Alhazard. But in presentation, it's a little flashier than the other series, largely thanks to character illustrations by artist Satoshi Urushihara (*Legend of Lemnear*, *Plastic Little*). Urushihara's speciality is designing attractive, scantily-clad women with wistful doe eyes and impossibly pert breasts, but he also creates stylish male characters with overflowing spikes of vibrantly-coloured hair, suited up in bulked-up armour. *Langrisser*'s other main star is its primary composer, Noriyuki Iwadare. Famous for his work on classics such as *Lunar* and *Grandia* for Game Arts, Iwadare's music is full of heavy synth rock, with a far more energetic flavour than the brooding orchestrations in the likes of *Final Fantasy Tactics*. The series was developed by some of the same staff as early PC strategy games like *Gaiflame* and *Gaia no Monshou*.

From a gameplay perspective, what sets *Langrisser* apart is its tremendous scale. Most similar games have you controlling between five and ten single units. By comparison, in *Langrisser* it's not uncommon to control over 30 units at one time, fighting against scores of enemies on a single map. The main characters are extremely powerful units dubbed Generals. Each General commands a Battalion of generic mercenaries, and the two share an important symbiotic relationship. Mercenaries are relatively weak, but are available in great numbers and relatively dispensable. Keeping your soldiers close not only keeps the General safe, but awards them a stat bonus, and even heals them after each turn. Killing enemies yields not only experience points (which are applied to the troop as a whole, rather than individual characters), but also cash to recruit additional mercenaries or buy equipment for your Generals. Additionally, if you kill a General, all of their troops will die automatically, but eliminating the rank and file one by one and saving the leader for last, while more dangerous, will lead to greater rewards. After gaining enough levels, you can choose to promote a General to a higher class, so you have some role in their character development.



There are three primary unit types, which have rock-paper-scissors advantages and disadvantages, much as with the *Fire Emblem* weapon triangle. Terrain bonuses also play a large part in strategy, as hiding in forests or mountains gives you incredible advantages over fighting out in the open. When you engage in combat, the game switches to a zoomed-in side view depicting the battle (as in Intelligent Systems' *Famicom Wars*). As units lose soldiers, their effectiveness in combat drops. While the battle sequences are cool at first, most of the games let you skip them, as they make the long battles seem even more drawn out. Indeed, that's the core issue with the *Langrisser* series – battles tend to drag on for a

ラングリッサーII
MASAYA

***Langrisser II* is the best game of the series, here shown in its initial Mega Drive form. Above, the hero Elwin holds his childhood friend Liana, who is being pursued by the imperials for reasons unknown.**

good while, though at least most of them let you save mid-battle.

The first game in the series was initially released for the Mega Drive. And for a long time, this was the only game localised into English, known as *Warsong*. This version slightly redesigns the character portraits to make them look less anime. *Langrisser II* was also a Mega Drive title, though it received a substantially remade version for the PC-FX called *Der Langrisser*. In it, your characters' initial statistics are determined by answering a series of questions, as in *Ogre Battle*, and this has since become standard for the series. The PC-FX game, being on a CD, benefits from animated cutscenes and voice acting. However, the biggest additions in *Der Langrisser* are the plot branches, allying you with different factions or letting you fight against them all. The difference is substantial – there are around 25 scenarios in the original *Langrisser II*, whereas the four different paths in *Der Langrisser* add up to over 75. It was later ported to the Super Famicom too, and all subsequent ports are based on *Der Langrisser*, even if they're titled *Langrisser II*. The first two games were compiled together for release on the PlayStation and Saturn.

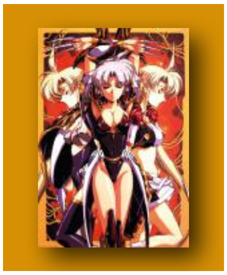
Masaya decided to reinvent the wheel for *Langrisser III* for the Saturn, moving to a system closer to that of SEGA's *Dragon Force*. Instead of commanding each unit on the battlefield, you're only given control over the Generals. After setting a destination for your General, your characters and the enemies move simultaneously. When they collide, the screen zooms into the battlefield, where you can give specific commands to each squad member, or just let the computer take over. You're then treated to a pseudo-3D rendition of the battle, though these scenes are both ugly and hard to follow. There's also a greater focus on the heroines; depending on how you interact with female compatriots, their feelings about you will change. While the multiple paths of *Der Langrisser* are gone, there are still two major endings depending on the various choices you've made throughout the game. Due to the changes, this game was deeply unpopular with fans.

The fourth and fifth games were returns to form, bringing back the battle system from the first two games, and enhancing the graphics a bit. These games are also closely connected storyline-wise. New to *Langrisser IV* is the Judgement system, where character turns come around based on their speed, as in *Final Fantasy Tactics*, rather than dividing actions into turns. *Langrisser V* changes to the movement system by allowing you to take half-, rather than whole-, square steps, giving greater control over your positioning, though the interface for this is rather clunky. After both entries had been released on the Saturn, Masaya bundled them together for the PlayStation, dubbing them *Final Edition*. A lot has changed in the port; the biggest is that *Langrisser IV* now uses *Langrisser V*'s battle system. Overall, these games aren't bad, but they never really recaptured the popularity of the first two games. So the developers, at this point known as Career Soft, moved onto a new series, called *Growlanser*.

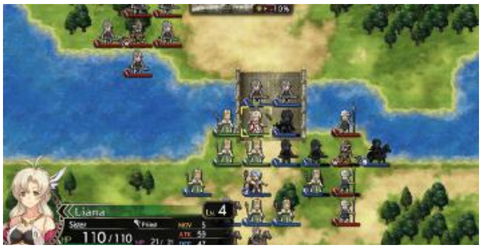
The *Langrisser* series didn't quite die though, as Masaya continued it on the Dreamcast with *Langrisser Millennium*. However, this is really a *Langrisser* game in name only – it's more of an action-strategy game than an SRPG, plus Satoshi Urushihara's artwork has been replaced by character artwork from Kaishaku (*Steel Angel Kurumi*). It was also a flop, though a Wonderswan game released around the same time, *Langrisser Millennium WS: The Last Century*, at least keeps the classic gameplay.

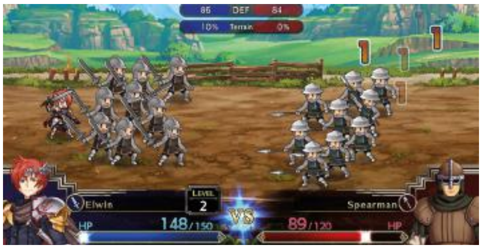
The series was resurrected again in 2016 with a 3DS title called *Langrisser Re:incarnation: Tensei*, likely released due to the success of the *Fire Emblem* games on the system. Developed by a company called Extreme, it did return to the usual SRPG gameplay, though in most other ways, it's an awful game – terrible balance and shockingly ugly graphics, and again missing the signature Urushihara artwork.

Langrisser was also brought back in the form of smartphone games, featuring characters from throughout the series, and these were actually pretty good. They culminated in a full remake compilation of *Langrisser I & II* for the PS4 and Switch in 2019. In addition to fully remade graphics, this includes new art by Ryo Nagi (*ar Tonelico*) as well as an option to use the classic Urushihara artwork, plus a choice between the original Mega Drive music and newly arranged versions. Not only does it give English players their first chance to experience *Langrisser II*, but it also expands the story in *Langrisser I*, adding plot branching. It isn't quite comprehensive – it's missing the animated cutscenes from the earlier CD versions, for one – but they're the best treatments the series has received since the 32-bit era.



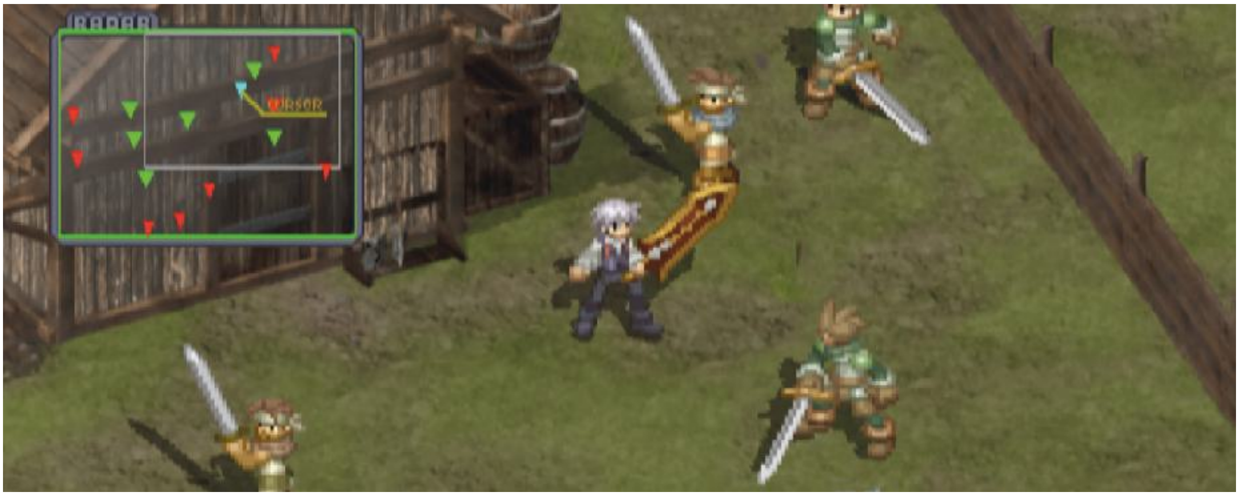
The large number of attractive women in bikini armour meant this series lent itself well to pin up-style artwork as seen above.





The artwork for the 2019 remake feels more modern, but lacks the distinctive style that characterised the series in its glory days.

PS4
LANGRISSER I & II



Growlanser (series)

Developer: Atlus/Career Soft | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2, PSP

After wrapping up the fifth *Langrisser* game, Career Soft transferred its efforts to *Growlanser*. The two series have some commonalities, particularly the Satoshi Urushihara artwork and focus on medieval fantasy stories; however, *Growlanser* does move away from the established SRPG framework a bit, being structured more like a traditional RPG, but with a rather unique battle system, calling itself a "non-stop dramatic RPG".

You walk around towns and areas, as in a regular JRPG, but shift gears when you encounter an enemy. This battle system is roughly similar to the "real time battle with pause" setup seen in PC RPGs like *Baldur's Gate*. There are no separate battle arenas – combat occurs right where you meet the enemies – and there is no grid, so characters can move freely anywhere. When combat begins, you command your characters to attack a specific enemy. Then they'll walk into range and fight them, until either they've defeated their foe or you interrupt them with new orders. When a character attacks, there's a brief waiting time before they can attack again. Mêlée combat tends to go quickly, but casting spells can often take longer. At first, keeping track of everything gets a bit hectic, since battle moves fairly quickly, but it's also much quicker and more involving than the typical stop-and-go flow of most RPG battles.

While the stories are fairly typical RPG stuff, the *Growlanser* games also have more in-depth character interaction systems. After many story events, you can choose to go on vacations with one of your buddies, deepening your relationship. While you can romance female characters, you're not restricted to them, and you can develop closer bonds with male characters too, which eventually lead to character-specific endings.

Annette
What in the world are you looking at?

GROWLANSER

The first *Growlanser* takes place in a land shared by two races, humans and winged Featherians, who both fled from a decaying world. A select few humans can wield magical power called Growshu, drawn from the power of their old world, while the Featherians, unable to use magic, live their lives in a secluded flying fortress.

The main character, Carmaine, is the adopted son of a palace magician named Sandra, in the kingdom of Rolandia. His fate is foretold: he will either destroy the world or lead it to salvation. When he comes of age, he is freed from his confines to explore the world, and discover his secret past. Since he is a silent protagonist, he is accompanied by a fairy-like creature named Tipi, who helps guide him around the world – most subsequent games also give the hero a fairy companion. He's also accompanied by his adopted sister Luise, who has the power to wield Growshu. The game features a unique character creation system, in which you, as the hero, wander around the opening town, and your stats are determined by how you interact with the townspeople. (Did you steal from the unattended store? Did you help the disabled woman up the stairs?

Compared to the straight SRPG *Langrisser* games, *Growlanser* is set up like a traditional JRPG, but with a unique real-time/turn-based tactical battle system.

TARGET
25
16

Raimy
To Ribocca Village! We're gonna visit a friend's family.

PSP
GROWLANSER
WAYFARER OF TIME

Did you dutifully watch the inn while the keeper was away? And so forth.)

This entry was originally released on the PlayStation, then updated for the PSP with some new characters and a few branching paths. It's also generally regarded as the series' best, not only for having the strongest story, but also for its excellent soundtrack by composer Noriyuki Iwadare (also of the *Langrisser* games), who did not work on subsequent instalments. Unfortunately, this game was never released in English.

The second game moves to the PlayStation 2, and it's the odd one out in many ways. It's the only game to feature a protagonist who can actually talk, and he doesn't have a fairy companion. Taking place a year after the first game, *Growlanser II: The Sense of Justice* focuses on Wein Cruz, a knight of the kingdom of Burnstein.

This entry introduces the ring weapon system, which lets you use spirit stones to customise your abilities. It's also unusual in that it gets rid of much of the exploration; instead you travel the game world via an interactive map, which sends you to various areas and scenarios. It's a relatively short game, as you can reach the ending in less than ten hours, but there are several different plot branches, so you need to play it through a few times to see everything. Overall, it's an interesting experiment which feels more like a spinoff than an actual sequel.

Growlanser III: The Dual Darkness is a little closer to the original game. It stars a boy named Slayn Wilder, who not only has amnesia but can also see ghosts and spirits. It's up to you to investigate and save a dying world where sunlight seems to be disappearing. In the original *Growlanser*, all of the areas were connected by separate map screens, with visible enemy encounters. This entry uses an overworld map that features random battles. The dungeons are also randomly generated. Since it was developed in tandem with *Growlanser II*, it uses many of the same assets. Both games were released in one package in North America by Working Designs, dubbed *Growlanser Generations*. However, given the various changes and compromises in relation to the first game, they aren't really all that well regarded.

The fourth game, subtitled *Wayfarer of Time*, returned to its roots, eliminating the world map and random dungeons of the third game and returning to the structure of the first. The hero is Crevanille, a member of a group of mercenaries, who wages a war against an army of angels, who in turn seemingly caused a cataclysmic event a millennium ago. Combat has been tweaked to add combo spells and super-limit ability attacks, plus missions have various objectives that you can pass or fail at. While the first game let you develop your vacation town, here it's already well developed, and instead acts as a base for your team, as in the *Suikoden* games. You can also cultivate your own fairy with their own personality, using designs based on the previous games. Lots of side characters also die in the course of the story, though some of them can be saved, depending on your actions. While originally a PlayStation 2 game, it was later ported to the PSP, with some extra story branches. This version was released in North America, though it excises all of the voice acting. It's a pretty decent title, and one of the best in the series, along with the first game. A storyline sequel called *Growlanser IV Return* was also released for the PlayStation 2, though this is an adventure game rather than an RPG.

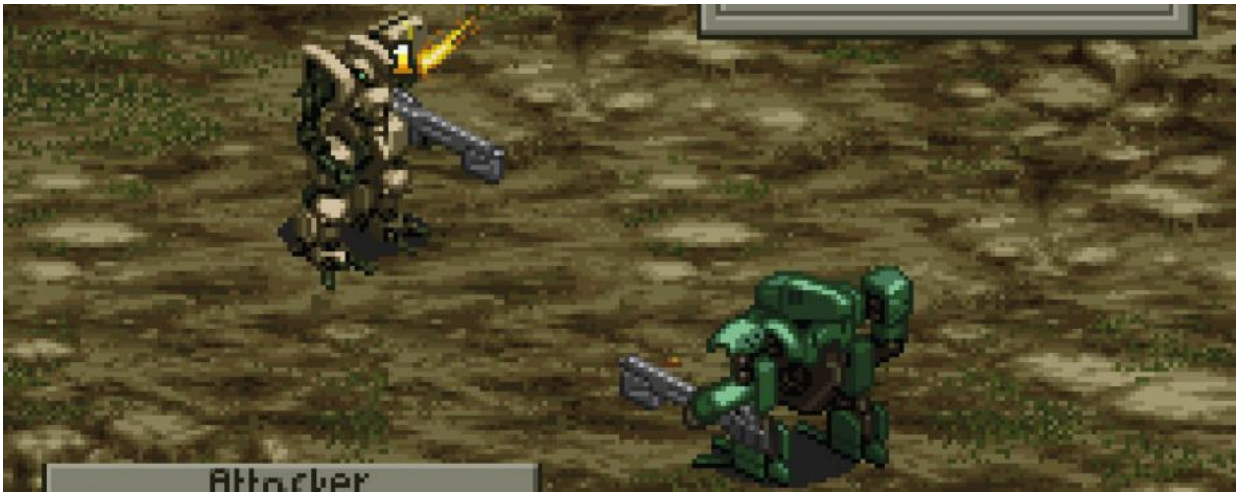
The fifth game, *Heritage of War,* is structured similarly to *Dragon Quest IV*, as the game is divided into five chapters, each with different protagonist; the "main" one, Zeonsilt, is playable in the final one. The story focuses on an island continent that is not only plagued by conflict between its human inhabitants, but also by marine monsters called Screapers. The visuals have moved to pure 3D, and while the *Growlanser* series was never a looker, it's pretty ugly here. The battle system has changed so that you directly control the protagonist, and the computer controls everyone else, though you can pause play to issue orders to them. The game was released in English, though it was rather poorly received.

Growlanser VI: Precarious World is the last game in the series and takes place in the same game world, though on a different continent, which is split into three warring nations. It ditches the chapter structure of the previous game, and stars an amnesiac soldier named Merklich, part of the group Monopolis, who eventually obtains the ability to go back in time. It fine-tunes some elements of the previous game, but ultimately its faults and foibles are similar. This one wasn't released internationally, but the series' fans never particularly cared for either the fifth or sixth entries anyway. After the PSP ports of the first and fourth *Growlanser* games, Career Soft was then drafted to work on Atlus' *Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor* series, where their SRPG talents were put to good use.

Opinions are split as to whether the first or the fourth *Growlanser* game is the best, though the latter has the advantage of an English localisation for the PSP.

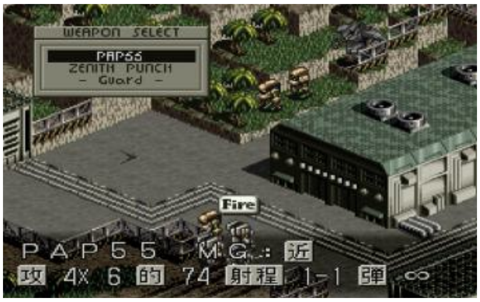
Several other *Growlanser* games were localised into English, though the quality of the series was inconsistent, and we tended to get the weaker entries.

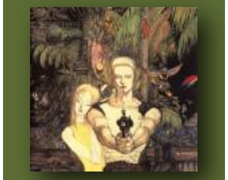
PlayStation 2
GROWLANSER
HERITAGE OF WAR
ATLUS



Front Mission (series)

Developer: Square | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC, PS1, PS2, WSC, DS, X360, PS3





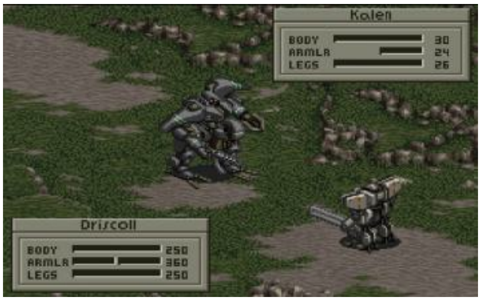
Yoshitaka Amano's waif-like character designs never quite fit with the relatively realistic military storyline of the *Front Mission* series, so later entries in the series changed to different illustrators.

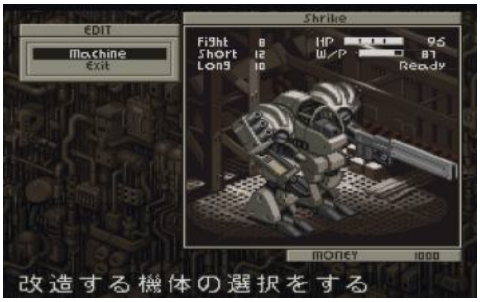
Front Mission is a mecha-based strategy game, initially co-developed by G-Craft and published by Square, released on the Super Famicom. Since then, the series has seen five instalments in the main series, as well as several spinoffs in different genres. Despite its relative popularity amongst enthusiasts in Japan, *Front Mission* has only made occasional appearances in the West. Instead of taking to the battlefield as themselves, the human characters pilot huge mechas called Wanzers (short for "Wanderpanzers" or "Walking Tanks"). The first *Front Mission* game is the only 2D entry in the main series, and utilises an angled perspective like that in *Tactics Ogre,* another popular Super Famicom strategy game released in the same year. Later games use combinations of sprites and 3D graphics. When the units attack, the viewpoint zooms in for a sequence showing the mechs duking it out, as in *Fire Emblem* and *Shining Force.*

Front Mission differentiates itself from other strategy RPGs to the extent that you can customise your units. Each mecha consists of a body section, two arms, and a pair of legs, and can be equipped with handheld weapons, shoulder mounted rockets, and backpacks. Each and every piece of equipment can be tinkered with, in order to create a well rounded platoon of combatants. Naturally, you can't just stick the best parts together and call it a day. You need to get the weight – and budget – balance right to create the most efficient machine possible.

Movement is based on an Action Point (AP) system. Although each unit can usually only move so many spaces in a turn, it's possible to move too far, and then be unable to attack. Each unit has four health bars – one for the head/body, one for each arm, and one for the legs. If your legs are destroyed, then you can only move one square per turn, drastically reducing your mobility. If either of your arms is destroyed, the relevant weapon will become useless. If your body is destroyed, then the whole mecha goes down in flames. Of course, you're going to want to aim for the body, except for two factors – not only is it usually the strongest part of the mecha, but in general, you can't pick which body part to target; it's usually determined randomly.

Keeping this in mind, there are tons of different weapons to equip to suit your strategy. Machine guns will randomly disperse damage across the body parts. Shotguns will damage all parts equally. Effectiveness, in both cases, is based on how close you are to your enemy. Rifles have a long range and attack a single body part. Mêlée weapons like knuckles and rods increase the damage from close range combat, which usually attacks the body, but leave your mecha open to attack. Missiles have even longer range, but you need to have plenty of distance between yourself and your foe, and they chew up a lot of AP. Grenades are also long-distance and can attack multiple squares. While you can level up your pilots in simulators, granting them new skills and





NINTENDO DS
FRONT MISSION
SQUARE ENIX

The first *Front Mission* wasn't released in English until the 2007 DS port, which notably removed Amano's art from the cover.

increasing their effectiveness with various weapons, ultimately it's more advantageous to tinker around with your equipment and see what works best.

As in most strategy games, the story has a heavy focus on war and politics. The game setting is in a near future, in which most of the nations have banded together to form two superpowers – the USN (United States of the New Continent, consisting of North and South America) and the OCU (Oceania Cooperative Union, which is most of Asia). Despite being a Japanese game, *Front Mission* has a very Western feel to it. Most games have an international cast, as well, with characters from all over the globe. Other than the original game and its spinoff *Gun Hazard*, which have distinctive character designs by the famous artist Yoshitaka Amano, the games have had relatively realistic depictions of the characters. The mechas look plenty different from your typical *Mechwarrior* robots, and they're far grittier and at least a bit more realistic than your typical Gundam.

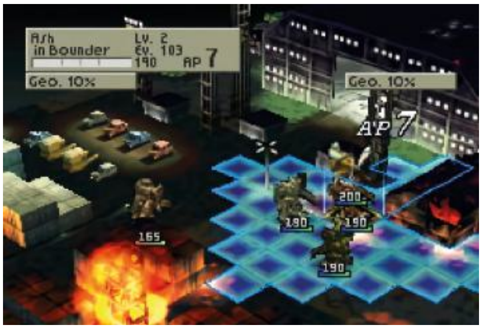
Most of the *Front Mission* games were directed by Toshiro Tsuchida, who had also worked on *Cybernator* (a.k.a. *Assault Suits Valken*) for NCS/Masaya. However, the series has seen a whole gamut of different character designers and composers, so the feel is not really unified across the games, and most of them appear quite disparate in many aspects. Even the gameplay often changes quite a bit between instalments.

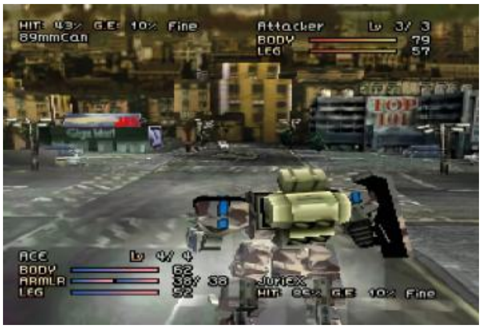
The original *Front Mission* focuses on a hotly contested warzone known as Huffman Island. A select group of OCU soldiers is sent to investigate a USN facility on the other side of the island. But naturally, they're ambushed, and war breaks out. As a Super Famicom SRPG, it's an excellent game, but against the background of the series, it's not nearly as in-depth as its successors. There are only a few skills, and neither the character-building nor the tactics are as complicated. The visuals are excellent though, as is the soundtrack, primarily by Yoko Shimomura. The original version was not released outside of Japan, though the menus are largely in English, so it's still relatively easy to navigate. A later PlayStation release tunes up the visuals and adds a new scenario, focusing on the USN side of the war and introducing several new characters with plenty of new missions. This provides the basis for the DS version, which is the only version released in English, and contains a few more missions that tie into later games in the series.

Front Mission 2 takes place 12 years after the original. There's turmoil in the Asian land of Aroldesh, with a revolutionary army gradually advancing and taking control of the country. Unfortunately, a young Wanzer pilot, along with his squadron, the Muddy Otters, gets caught up in an attack, and the soldiers are forced to scatter. Eventually, they regroup, meet up with another lost battalion, named the Dull Stags, and begin their fight against the dissidents. In addition to the usual mid-mission exposition and mecha upgrading, there's also an Internet-like feature that lets you research various characters, as well as unlock various stuff, if you have the right passwords.

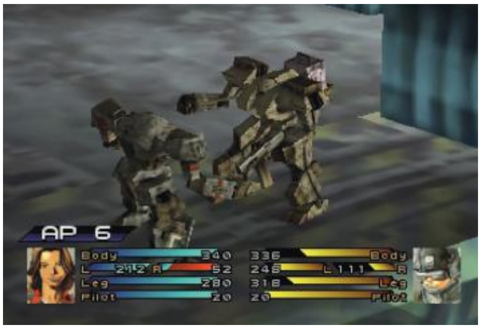
This sequel expands greatly on the original, adding significant layers of depth. There's a much heavier emphasis on skills, as there are now well over 40 (compared to the seven in the original). You can then pick the skills you want to equip, which are randomly executed in battle. The other big change is the emphasis on AP consumption and regeneration. The more AP you have when you attack, the better your chance of succeeding.

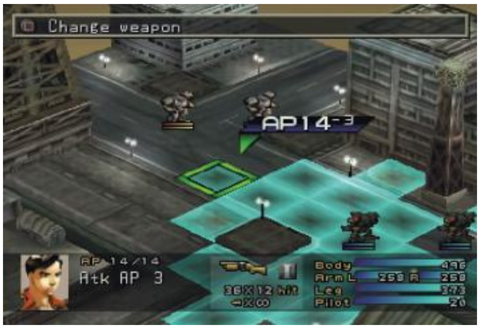
***Front Mission 2* would be a decent game, if it weren't for the absolutely glacial pacing, largely caused by persistently long load times and fancy but overly long combat sequences.**





FRONT MISSION
SQUARESOFT





PlayStation
front mission 3
SQUARESOFT

The first two games had not been localised into English when *Front Mission 3* was released in 1999, but it's a fine entry point into the series.

AP regeneration is also affected by surrounding units – enemy units will drag it down, but keeping close to friends will keep it up.

On the main screen, the environments are 3D, although the mechas are ugly 2D sprites. Amano was replaced as character designer by fantasy artist Jun Suemi (who worked on Japanese *Wizardry* titles). Noriko Matsueda, who contributed to the first game's music, returned to compose the whole soundtrack, though it's not quite as good.

The fight scenes are no longer just two mechas shooting at each other. Instead, you're treated to a cinematic sequence showing both opponents dashing around the landscape and fighting violently. The graphics are surprisingly crisp and the frame rate is extraordinarily smooth, but all this leads to exasperating load times, and these scenes are not skippable, at least in the initial release. The *Ultimate Hits* version lets you disable these, which does greatly speed up the pace.

Front Mission 3 was released for the PlayStation in 1999, and was the first game in the series to get an official English release. This works well: it's more refined and easy to get into than its predecessors. Taking place roughly ten years after *Front Mission 2*, our heroes are Kazuki and Ryogo, two Japanese teenagers working as Wanzer test pilots for Kirishima Heavy Industries. However, while they're delivering some mechas to a military base, a suspicious explosion rocks the land, drawing the two into international conspiracies, Chinese rebellions, the mysterious human experiment known as the Imaginary Numbers project, and the hunt for a deadly weapon known as MIDAS.

Right at the beginning of the game, Kazuki is offered a choice – go with his friend Ryogo to make a delivery, or stay at home. This seemingly insignificant decision will affect the storyline for the rest of the game, sending the heroes on two completely different paths, allying our heroes with opposing factions – one with the Da Han Zhong (DHZ) Army, and the other with the USN.

Front Mission 3 tunes up many aspects of the game, giving range to most of your weapons instead of relying on close-quarters combat, and linking skill acquisition to equipping certain mecha parts. You can now distribute AP to increase your accuracy or evasion, or fine tune your armour to protect against attack by flame, impact, or penetration. The "internet" feature from its predecessor has been greatly expanded upon, offering World Wide Web-style pages for all of the major organisations in the game, lending incredible depth to the game's storyline.

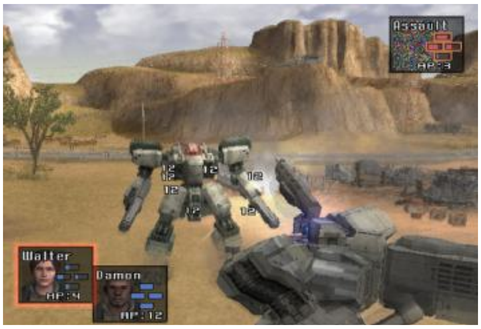
If a character is attacked, there's a random chance that they'll be ejected from their mecha. It's possible to kill a pilot when they're unprotected, or even hijack enemy mechas. Enemies can also surrender, if they feel the odds are too stacked against them, and their mechas can be nabbed after you've won. The game as a whole is much faster paced. The load times are practically gone, the fight sequences are shorter, the maps are smaller, and you only control four characters in each stage. There are well over 100 scenarios across both storylines, so the game still feels meaty. The only issue is that the game is quite a bit easier than your standard *Front Mission*.

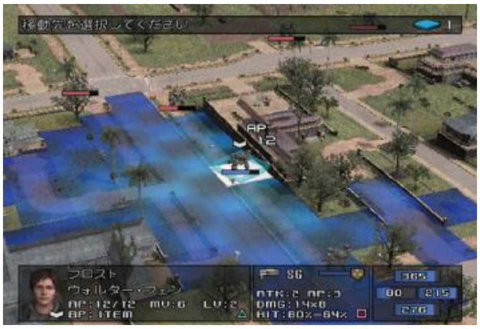
The character designs this time were provided by Akihiro Yamada (*Record of Lodoss War* manga). The music is by Koji Hayama (*Choaniki*) and Hayato Matsuo (*Ogre Battle*), and while there are a good number of memorable songs, it's not really a standout soundtrack.

After the drastic departure of *Front Mission 3*, the series moves back towards its roots with the first PlayStation 2 instalment. The large-scale battles have returned, and the difficulty has been cranked back up. Thankfully, all of the improvements, such as the sped-up battle sequences and distance weapons, have been carried over. (The ejecting pilots have been removed though.)

There are once again two storylines in *Front Mission 4*, although here the focus alternates between them every few stages. Elsa is a rookie recruit sent to help defend a German base from attack, while Darril is a lazy USN soldier who goes AWOL with his comrades after stealing some gold. Their stories eventually intertwine, although they remain separate through most of the game. It's also the first *Front Mission* to use voice acting, which is in English in all regions.

There are many new additions to the system in *Front Mission 4*, the biggest being a shift of emphasis onto the Link attacks. Before going into battle, you can set a certain number of Links





PlayStation.2
FRONT MISSION
5

Perhaps due to the chilly reception of *Front Mission 4* (and the DS re-release of the original *Front Mission*), the fifth and final game of the core series was passed over for localisation. Which is a shame, since it's the best one.

between specific characters. When one character attacks, and one of their Linked allies is within attack range (and has the necessary AP), that ally provides an additional attack. You can also set up defensive Links for counter-attacking. Naturally, the bad guys can do the same thing, which can lead to trouble if you're not careful. Even though it's an excellent idea, the overall strategy focuses a bit too much on setting up and executing Links, which makes gameplay somewhat cumbersome. Your attacks can be affected by the weather or time of day – night often falls during battles, making it harder to wield certain weapons. Additionally, all of your guns – not just missile launchers – have limited ammo.

The visuals have obviously improved over the PlayStation days, but they still look muddy. The music, provided by newcomer Hidenori Iwasaki, is also rather mediocre. It's still a decent strategy game but some of these nitpicks drag it down a bit.

Front Mission 5: Scars of the War takes everything from *FM4* and retools it into a far superior game. The game's plot spans nearly the entirety of the *Front Mission* timeline. The opening sequence depicts the First Huffman Incident (which took place years before the first *Front Mission* game) and concerns the lives of a trio of friends – Walter Feng, Randy O'Neill, and Glen Duval – caught on opposing sides of the war. The story of *Front Mission 5* takes place over several years, as it chronicles Walter's tour of duty in the USN army. Major portions take place in between *Front Missions 2* and *3*, and you'll encounter several familiar characters, including Emma from *FM3* and Darril from *FM4*. Many of the more annoying aspects of *Front Mission 4* have wisely been ditched. Gone are the weather effects and limited ammo for non-missile weapons, and the Link system has been drastically simplified, so it's now just a skill to equip.

It's also remarkable how much the graphics have improved in *Front Mission 5*. The muddiness is gone, the terrain is more detailed, and the mechas look more awesome than ever. But the real clincher lies in the presentation. Unlike the old games, in which you would move first, then attack, in *FM5* you select your position and then choose your action before you actually execute any commands. When you attack, your mecha slides up to your enemy, the viewpoint fades into a close-up viewpoint, and you watch as the robots exchange blows, all in one smooth motion. The shakiness of the camera emulates the feeling of real war footage, and the viewpoint constantly changes, making these scenes far more engaging. A majority of the soundtrack has once again been composed by Hidenori Iwasaki, although this time he's joined by Kenichiro Fukui. The end result is the best game in the series, though unfortunately it was not localised into English.

This is the last game in the mainline series, though there are plenty of spinoffs. *Front Mission: Gun Hazard* was released for the Super Famicom in 1996, and is an action game similar to *Cybernator*, though it's a bit more open-ended and story-focused, with a world map for travel and more mecha customisation. The best aspect of this game is the soundtrack, jointly supplied by Nobuo Uematsu and Yasunori Mitsuda, two of the best musicians to have worked with Square. It's also the only game, other than the first, with art by Yoshitaka Amano.

In the PlayStation era, Square also released *Front Mission Alternative*, which is an unusual real-time strategy game. In each mission, you're given a map of the stage, complete with the locations of enemy soldiers. All you need to do is tell your battalions of mechas which waypoints to go to and which enemies to attack. Then you watch your mechas march through the level, stumble over the scenery, attack the bad guys, and wait until you issue your next order. There's a lot of sitting and watching your mechas traipse over the maps, which isn't terribly interesting, and the story isn't that interesting either. So overall, it's a bit of a failed experiment.

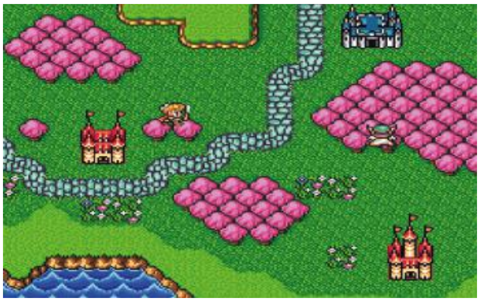
Square tried for an online battle game with *Front Mission Online*, which ran from 2005 to 2008. They then decided to reboot the series with *Front Mission Evolved* in 2009. Series producer Shinji Hashimoto oversaw the project, while Motomu Toriyama wrote the story, but otherwise, the game was developed primarily by American studio Double Helix. It is a simplified 3D mecha action game, with some multiplayer elements. The action is average, but nothing about it really feels like *Front Mission*, and the story, which is a complete reboot, isn't very good either. As such, this revival fizzled out, and the series has been dormant since.

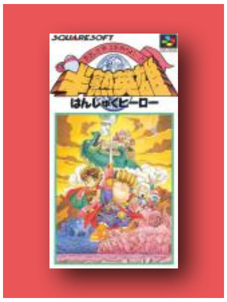
Hanjuku Hero (series)

Developer: Square | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): FC, SFC, WSC, PS2, DS

Hanjuku Hero ("Half-Boiled Hero") is a comical real time strategy RPG franchise that got its start on the Famicom. The goal is simple – starting from your home castle, you must command your generals to capture all of the enemy castles on the map. When one of your units meets up with an opponent, the game switches to a battle view, in which combatants literally fling themselves at each other, like toy soldiers being banged together by an unseen child. Other than jamming the button to make them stronger, the only real interaction here involves either using a trump card for various effects, or summoning a monster that hatches out of an egg, which will fight in place of your team. The system then changes to a typical RPG command menu, so you can instruct your chosen monster. This system influenced the Summon command seen in the *Final Fantasy* games – the mascot of *Hanjuku Hero*, the superhero Eggman, even shows up as a summon monster in *Final Fantasy V*. Time flows during your campaign, and at the end of every month, you collect the money from the territories you've captured and use it to pay your generals, hire more troops, and so forth. There are both set and random events, depending on the time of year, with various effects.

The first game is a little simple, as there are only three maps, but the series came into its own with the Super Famicom sequel, subtitled *Aa, Sekaiyo Hanjukunare ...* ("Ah, a World Half-Boiled"). This entry really cranks up the humour, particularly focusing on the thick-witted prince of Alma Moon, who can barely even read, much less command an army. There are also tons of parodies of other games, including *Final Fantasy* (the field maps, tiles, and sprites seem lifted from these games), *SaGa*, *Dragon Quest*, and even *Live-A-Live*. Composers Koichi Sugiyama and Nobuo Uematsu even show up for their game's sound tests.



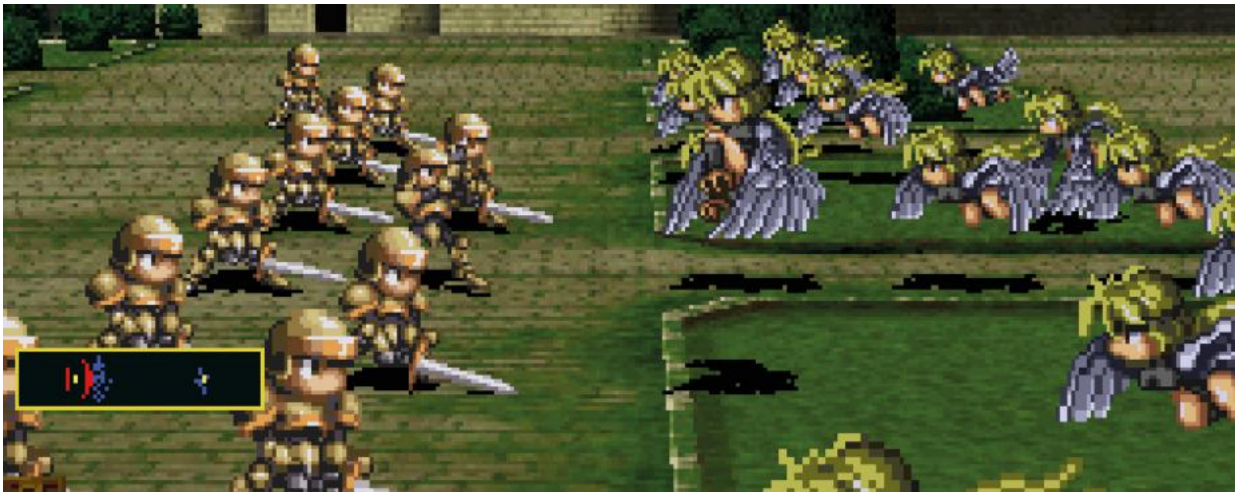


The game is also both easier and more complex, lessening the cruel difficulty of the Famicom game while implementing other features, like generals and eggs that grow stronger as they fight.

The series saw a revival on the PlayStation 2, with two entries. *Hanjuku Hero vs. 3D* represents all of the characters as paper-thin 2D sprites fighting in a 3D rendered world, which looks quite silly when you see dozens of them gather around together. The fourth game, simply called *Hanjuku Hero 4*, refines and updates some mechanics, like allowing three-on-three battles (instead of one-on-one like the earlier games), providing a command menu during combat, and sticking in an octopus meter that determines the emotional state of the warriors. There was a spinoff for the DS called *Egg Monster Hero*, which is actually a Rogue-like in which you explore dungeons and use various egg monsters to attack.

The series technically ended here; however, the second game saw a revival on mobile phones, which included additional cameos like Dr. Eggman (a.k.a. Dr. Robotnik) from *Sonic the Hedgehog*. Alas, none of these ever saw a release outside of Japan – perhaps Square felt the games were just too silly – but they're a lot of fun.

"Hanjuku" means "half-boiled", referring to underdone eggs and applied to the dim-witted hero of these games. A more appropriate English translation would be "half-baked" but then you'd lose all of the egg jokes.



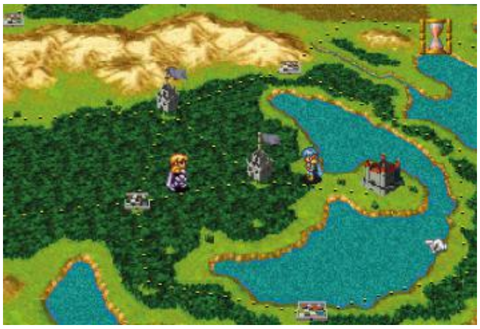
Dragon Force

Developer: SEGA/J-Force | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SAT, PS2

If more people had played it, *Dragon Force* would likely be atop more strategy RPG fans' all-time greats lists. Its excellent translation, infinite replayability and technical wizardry make *Dragon Force* deserving of that accolade.

Hailing from a similar line of RTS games as *Ogre Battle, Dragon Force* allows you to control one of Legendra's eight monarchs and their army, with the goal of uniting the continent and defeating the evil god with the nice goddess' power. Gameplay consists of two modes: strategy (plan your invasions by grouping your generals and their troops, then dispatch them across the map) and tactical (armies battle in real-time). Each monarch has five key generals, plus a few other characters germane to them. The generals each have distinct portraits, powers, and personalities, and when two who are in some way connected meet as opponents in battle, they exchange unique words. This cements your attachment to the characters and helps *Dragon Force* feel like an organic world.

While strategy games often feature large battles (*Kessen, Suikoden*), usually armies function as units – meaning a large number of soldiers is grouped into a single unit, to which you issue orders, and it acts as one. In *Dragon Force*, every unit of every army is a fully animated and detailed sprite that fights autonomously (AI controlled, although you give them general direction). Up to 100 soldiers on each side actually fight in real-time across a scrolling, parallax-laden battlefield, and you can manually zoom in and out. Even today, seeing 200 distinct sprites hack away at each other like it's *Lord of the Rings* is an impressive sight. Different troop types vary in effectiveness depending on the terrain, the general's skill, and their advantage or disadvantage relative to the other troop type.

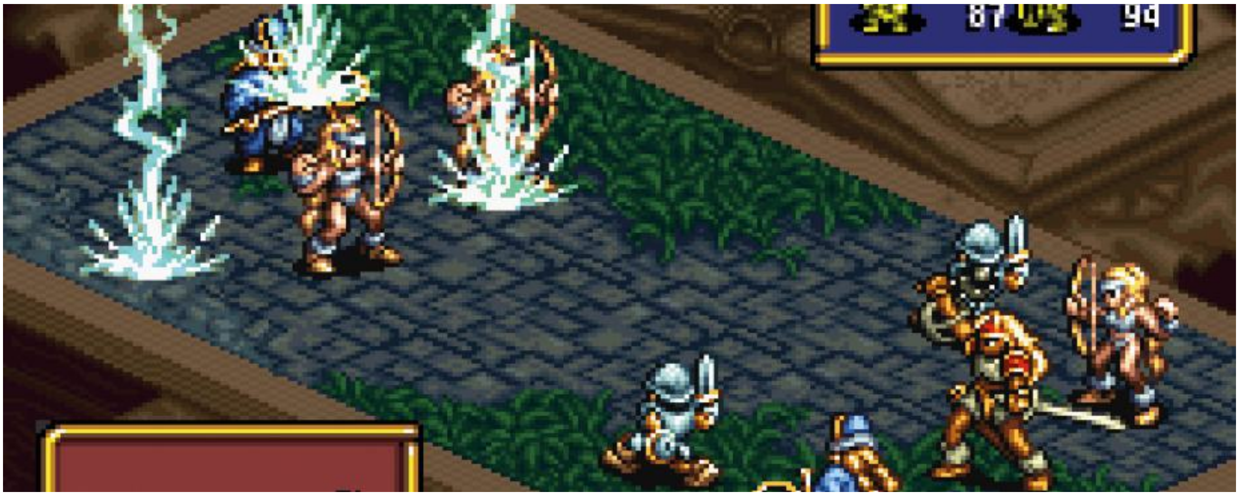


Most importantly, the formations you choose and your in-battle commands (and magic spells) really are what decides whether you win or lose. The game engine and systems allow you the flexibility to pretty much play the game as you wish, and try different combinations and tactics in reply to your enemies' attacks. If you like beating games despite self-imposed handicaps, *Dragon Force* will keep you busy pretty much forever.

Part of what makes *Dragon Force* special is the localisation. Working Designs, as usual, wrote a great script: conversational and natural English, but with "epic RPG" cheesisms scattered properly throughout ("The bell tolls for thee!" "Fools and zealots alike walk death's dusty road"). The pop-culture jokes are at minimum, unusually for a WD script. The soundtrack by Tatsuyuki Maeda is classic SEGA. The battle tracks are mainly upbeat orchestra, featuring horns and strings over pop drumbeats, with memorable melodies at the core.

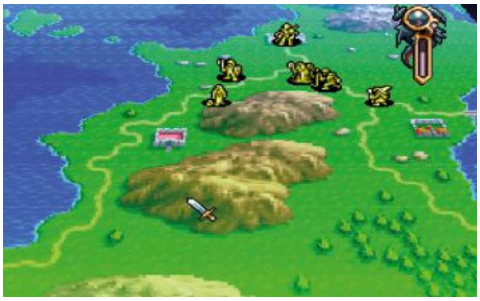
The sequel added some units and dulled the colour palette, but is otherwise mostly the same. A *SEGA Ages* PlayStation 2 port of the first game adds in new illustrations and voice acting, plus two new characters. Both were regrettably Japan-only.

The fact that Working Designs, not SEGA, localised this cult classic shows the American branch's tragic indifference towards role-playing games.



Ogre Battle (series)

Developer: Quest | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SNES, NGPC, PS1, SAT, N64



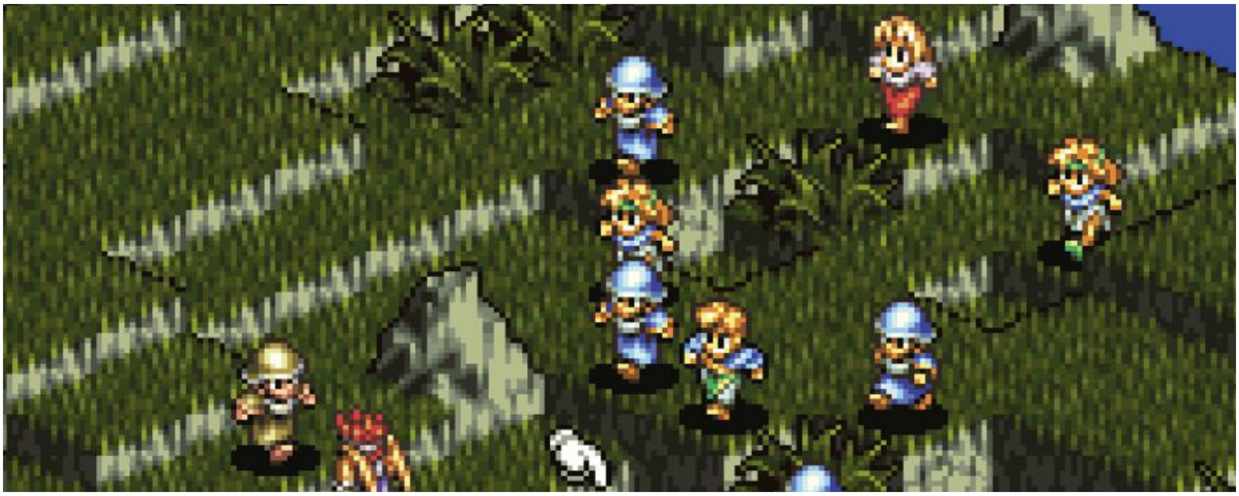
Quest was a small company that worked on titles like the NES action game *Conquest of the Crystal Palace* and the TG16 shooter *Magical Chase.* And yet it was *Ogre Battle*, a real-time strategy RPG for the SNES, helmed by Yasumi Matsuno, that defined the company's legacy. The initial entry is subtitled *The March of the Black Queen*, with both title and subtitle being references to songs by Queen.

The core game is similar to Square's *Hanjuku Hero,* in that you move units across the map, capture castles, and defeat enemy strongholds. The more cities you hold, the more money you get, allowing for stronger combat units. One of the key differences is in how you customise those units. Each is led by a commander, with accompanying fighters positioned on a 2 × 3 grid. When you enter combat, accompanied by a voice that yells "Fight it out!", your squad and its enemy trade blows for a few turns. You don't directly control the battle, just broad orders as to what type of unit to attack; your unit obeys, picking an enemy based on position. As a result, you need to customise your unit to maximise its attack potential while minimizing the damage it suffers. There are several classes, which grow stronger as they level up, and units can be equipped with various weapons and armour. You can also use tarot cards, which are basically magic spells, to help influence the battles. Just as important is paying attention to your alignment. Various actions will set you higher or lower, which determines what kinds of unit you can use, among other aspects, and affect the ending.

The map screen is presented using Mode 7 scaling effects with board game-esque figures, with unique character art by Akihiko Yoshida. Hitoshi Sakimoto and Masaharu Iwata were the main composers for the orchestral soundtrack, which defined the duo's style for several subsequent games, many connected with Matsuno. The storyline in this initial entry is a little thin – the protagonist is silent, though there are assorted units that can join in (again, depending on alignment) – and is definitely not the focus. But it does try to present the complexities and ethics of war in a way that was rarely seen in strategy RPGs.

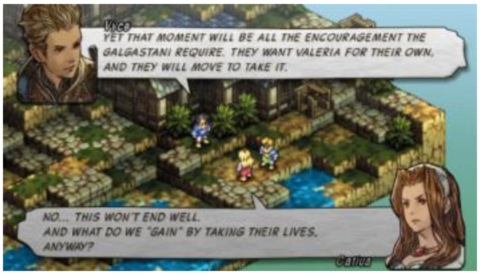
Unlike *Hanjuku Hero*, *Ogre Battle* was released internationally, and received a few 32-bit ports, which improved the music but added annoying load times, as well as a portable NEOGEO Pocket Color rendition. It was followed up by *Tactics Ogre* (see opposite page), a very different type of SRPG, but its true sequel was *Ogre Battle 64: Person of Lordly Caliber.* While Matsuno was not directly involved with this title, it has a much stronger storyline than its predecessor. There are assorted gameplay revisions too, like restricting unit movement to pre-determined paths, replacing the tarot cards with the somewhat similar Elem Pedra attacks, and altering unit formations based on the direction they were approached from. It's one of the very few of its type on the Nintendo 64, and while fans of the SNES game may bristle at the changes, it's still an excellent title.

***Ogre Battle* began a line of games helmed by Matsuno, all with similar styles, including *Tactics Ogre, Final Fantasy Tactics, Vagrant Story,* and *Final Fantasy XII.* Despite all playing very differently, they shared many of their artistic staff, and all feel very similar.**



Tactics Ogre (series)

Developer: Quest | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SFC, PS1, SAT, GBA, PSP



Vyce

YET THAT MOMENT WILL BE ALL THE ENCOURAGEMENT THE GALGASTANI REQUIRE. THEY WANT VALERIA FOR THEIR OWN, AND THEY WILL MOVE TO TAKE IT.

NO... THIS WON'T END WELL.
AND WHAT DO WE "GAIN" BY TAKING THEIR LIVES, ANYWAY?

Catiua

Tactics Ogre
Let Us Cling Together

In creating the follow-up to *Ogre Battle*, Yasumi Matsuno took the series in a different direction, resulting in *Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together*. It's a somewhat more typical SRPG, similar to *Fire Emblem* and *Shining Force*, though enhanced with even more narrative and mechanical depth.

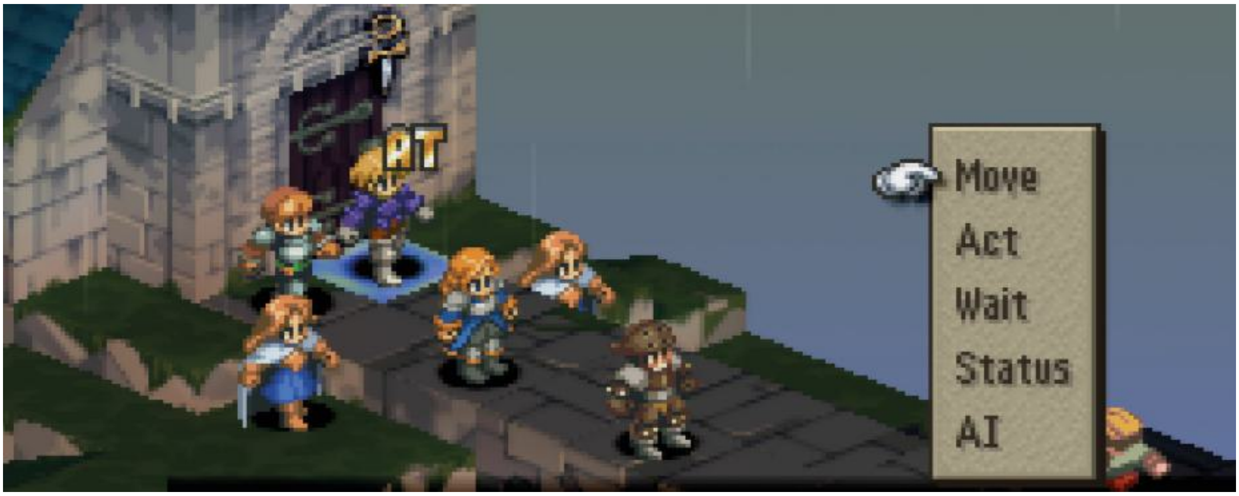
The story takes place in the Valerian Isles, which have been thrust into chaos as the Kingdom of Galgastan attempts to take over the Walister people. The story focuses primarily on three people – the hero Denam, his older sister Kachua, and his best friend Vice – as they fight back and protect their fellow Walstanians. The story was influenced by the Yugoslav Wars of the '90s, and, like *Ogre Battle*, examines the difficult moral questions that come with conflict.

Tactics Ogre switches to an isometric perspective, similar to the one in Mythos Games' 1994 PC strategy game *X-Com*. This proved to be hugely inspirational for the genre, with many subsequent games borrowing the look and feel of *Tactics Ogre*. The added depth allows for additional strategies – attacking from the sides or behind, or from higher ground, will be more successful. Movement is affected by not only map height but also equipment weight: heavier items are more powerful but will slow you down. Since opposing characters will typically counter-attack, it's best to put yourself in situations that will minimise the damage received. This is especially important given that once a character is killed, they cannot be resurrected, at least until you obtain a spell late in the game. There is more flexiblity than in *Fire Emblem* though, as you can create and train units of various classes, but it's still an extremely difficult game.

Tactics Ogre also has a branching storyline, which takes Denam down different paths depending on his actions. All are tragic in some way, as war is never pretty, even when necessary. The soundtrack, again by Hitoshi Sakimoto and Masaharu Iwata, is absolutely stellar.

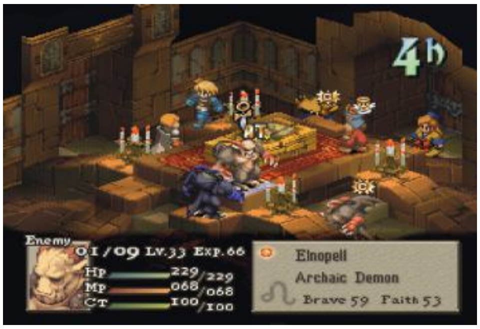
The SFC version was not initially released in English, though it did come out internationally for the PlayStation in 1998; the port, however, suffers from poor sound and other technical issues. Outside of *Final Fantasy Tactics*, the game got a Game Boy Advance sequel subtitled *The Knight of Lodis*. Developed without Matsuno's input, it's a decent game, though somewhat impaired by a weak soundtrack and long processing times on enemy turns. *Tactics Ogre* was later revived for the PSP in 2011, with Matsuno returning to consult. While *Final Fantasy Tactics* received a lousy port for the platform earlier on, this is a full-on remake that drastically enhances every aspect. The mechanics have changed, as fallen characters can be resurrected and classes, rather than individual characters, gain experience, greatly reducing tedium. The biggest revision is the Chariot Tarot, which allows you to rethink strategies in battle, and also lets you explore alternate paths in the story. Everything comes together to create the most essential edition of one of the best, most influential titles in the SRPG genre.

The squat, cutesy characters do somewhat belie the seriousness of *Tactics Ogre*, though the story contains only a few of the juvenile tropes that tend to typify Japanese RPGs.



Final Fantasy Tactics (series)

Developer: Square | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1, PSP, GBA, DS



PlayStation
FINAL FANTASY TACTICS

A combination of *Final Fantasy* and *Tactics Ogre*, this SRPG remains one of the best of all time.

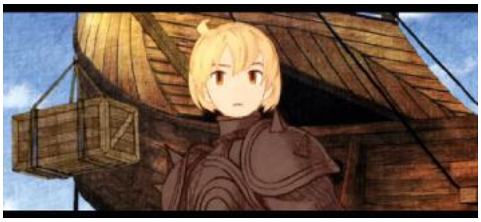
Final Fantasy Tactics is a strategy-RPG spinoff from the mainline series, initially released for the PlayStation. Although Square had already dabbled in the genre with *Front Mission* for the Super Famicom, for this game they hired Quest, the developers of *Tactics Ogre*, including director/writer Yasumi Matsuno, character artist Akihiko Yoshida, and composers Hitoshi Sakimoto and Masaharu Iwata.

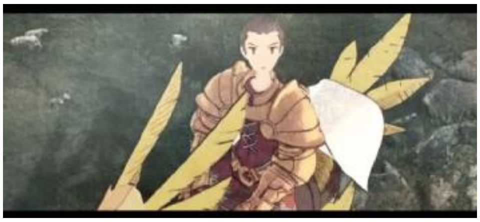
The story focuses on Ramza Beoulve, a noble caught in the middle of a war of succession. During his adventures, he regularly meets up with Delita, a commoner and former friend, who has the same basic end goal but goes about things differently. That's the extremely brief version of the story, which is actually a complex tale about class struggles and political machinations – indeed, the story is much more *Tactics Ogre* than *Final Fantasy*. The setup was inspired by the 15th century English War of the Roses, which was also the inspiration for George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice*. The game is also extremely hard to follow, as there are at least a dozen important characters, many of whom disappear for large spans of game time. As such, its ambitions are simply too grand for the confines of a 32-bit strategy-RPG, though it certainly tries.

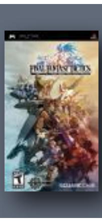
Final Fantasy Tactics introduces a medieval world called Ivalice. There are familiar *Final Fantasy* things, particularly creatures like Moogles and Chocobos, and various character classes like Dragoons and Black Mages. The other main link to the core series is the customisation inherited from *Final Fantasy V,* which allows you to train your units in a specific Job class, gaining the associated skills, then change to a different one while still maintaining everything they learned previously. It's flexible too, separating out attack, support, and movement capabilities, and allowing you to learn abilities in any order you like.

It also changes the way that turns play out. In *Fire Emblem* (and many similar games), each side moves all of its units at once before switching to the other. In *Final Fantasy Tactics*, each unit is placed in a turn queue, depending on its speed, equipment weight, and other attributes, so there's less sitting around and waiting for the CPU to move. Additionally, certain attacks, like magic, take time to charge, requiring that you plan your moves ahead to ensure that your target stays in range. The interface makes this somewhat difficult, and is indeed one of the game's biggest issues.

At the time of this game's release, the *Final Fantasy* name was aimed at a wider audience than something like *Tactics Ogre*, so this game was designed to ease non-SRPG players into the genre. It is a little gentler than its predecessor – the battlefields are smaller and have fewer units, and fallen characters can be resurrected, as long as you act within a turn limit. However, it does suffer from an inverse difficulty curve: the early stages of the game can be too hard, especially for newcomers, but it becomes much more manageable once







The cutscenes newly added to the PlayStation Portable version, however brief, are beautiful renditions of Akihiko Yoshida's unique character designs.

you've unlocked some more Job classes and built up your team. Late in the game you can almost totally break it, thanks to powerful classes like the Calculator, who can use maths in curious ways to create incredible amounts of destruction.

Final Fantasy Tactics came on the heels of *Final Fantasy VII*, and it seemed rather off the wall at the time. Its fantasy setting appeared quaint compared to the spiky hair/huge sword sci-fi world of that game, and it eschews 3D graphics and fancy cutscenes in favour of primarily 2D visuals. It looks much like *Tactics Ogre* did, complete with sprite-based characters, though since the battlefields are 3D, they can be rotated at the player's command, allowing for more elaborate design. The orchestral score is brilliant, particularly the battle themes, though the style is markedly different from that of previous *Final Fantasy* games.

Altogether, *Final Fantasy Tactics* is a definite classic, and one of the pinnacles of the SRPG genre. The game was a fairly big success in both Japan and North America – it sold well, it earned great critical acclaim, and created a rare product that could both satisfy genre fans and make new ones. A 2007 PSP port, given the subtitle *War of the Lions*, adds in some animated cutscenes in a gorgeous painted art style, and a complete retranslation that is far better than the only halfway comprehensible English of the PlayStation game. However, it suffers from numerous technical issues, particularly the noticeable slowdown that occurs when casting spells, but also smudgy visuals and noticeably worse music. A later smartphone port fixed most of these issues, though the touch-screen controls don't work all that well.

While there was never quite a sequel, Square did follow it up with a spinoff for the Game Boy Advance, titled *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance*. As it was aimed towards the slightly younger audience of the portable, various elements were simplified. The story focuses on a group of children in the real world, who find themselves (and the rest of their town) transported into the world of Ivalice. Most seem to prefer this fantasy version of their lives to their real ones, but the hero, Marche, does not, and finds himself at odds with his former friends. The storyline is thin, with the emphasis on fulfilling sub-quests. There's quite of a bit content, but it can become tedious.

The Job system is still present, but has seen some changes, mostly due to the inclusion of other races. In addition to humans (called Humes), there are the lizard-like Bangaa, the rabbit-like Nu Mou, the bunny-like Viera, and the classic Moogles. Jobs are restricted to specific races, so the ability to mix and match abilities is limited. Skills are also learned by equipping weapons, which you first need to find, drastically limiting your freedom. The most contentious additions are Judges, neutral characters who enforce Laws, which are determined at the start of battle. These will outlaw certain attacks or abilities, and ignoring them could send the offending character to jail (or worse). It's an odd inclusion, restraining play, and doesn't make much sense – it was so hated in the original Japanese release that the overseas version made it less troublesome. Overall, *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* is still a great SRPG – it maintains many of the core elements that made its predecessor so fantastic – but the drastic change in tone and altered mechanics made it a disappointment for some fans of the original.

A sequel was released for the DS, called *Final Fantasy Tactics A2*. While featuring a new roster of characters and ditching the "real world kids in fantasy" angle, it plays very similarly. The Judges and Laws are less annoying – you get bonuses for complying, rather than punishments for breaches – and new races include the pig-like Seeq and the winged dragon-like Gria. It's a definite improvement over the GBA game, but those who preferred the PS1/PSP game will still probably find little of interest.

COMMANDS
Move
Action
Wait
Niena
HP 363/363
Lv50 MP 10/129
Config
Help

NINTENDO DS
FINAL FANTASY TACTICS A2

The original *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* made some technical compromises to fit onto the GBA platform, but its DS sequel looks and sounds much better.

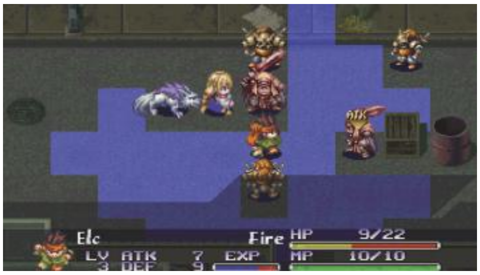
Arc the Lad (series)

Developer: G-Craft/Cattle Call | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2, WSC, IOS, AND, MOB

In the early days of the PlayStation, Sony of Japan had three main RPG series: *Wild Arms*, *Popolocrois*, and *Arc the Lad*. Only *Wild Arms* was released internationally, while the other two remained Japan-only for quite some time.

Arc the Lad is a strategy RPG series developed by G-Craft, the same folks who made the mecha game *Front Mission* for Square. The eponymous Arc is a young man who investigates the disappearance and apparent death of his father. During this journey, he obtains a mysterious power from a Guardian spirit, that will eventually allow him to obtain an artefact called the Ark, which will help protect the world. At the outset, he is joined by Kukuru, a girl who's a member of the tribe that protects the flame that protects the Ark, and Poco, a member of the royal drum corps. The world has elements of typical fantasy, but it also takes place in a near-modern world filled with technology like airships. The soundtrack was provided by Masahiro Andou, the guitarist from the Japanese jazz-fusion band T-Square, giving the music a very distinctive feel.

Arc the Lad plays much like *Shining Force*, in that the player directly controls the character on the field. However, there are no cinematic attack sequences, so the pacing is fairly breezy. All in all, it's a pretty good game … but it's really only a prologue for the sequel. In order to complete their RPG lineup, Sony needed something for the PlayStation's first year, so the planned game ended up being drastically scaled back. As a result, the first *Arc the Lad* is pretty simple. There are no shops, as items are simply obtained on the battlefield, and nothing really to explore, as you just move from encounter to encounter. The total playing time is about ten hours, and the game ends just as the story is beginning to take off. Given the 2D visuals, which are only slightly improved over typical late-era SNES ones, and the short play time, it is easy to understand why Sony of America passed on localising it.

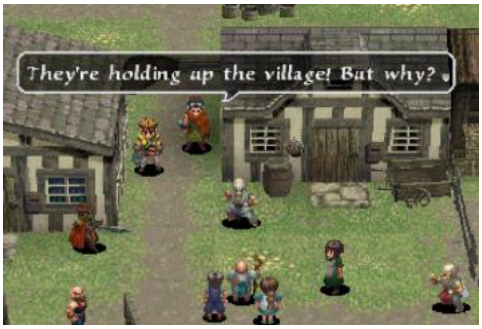


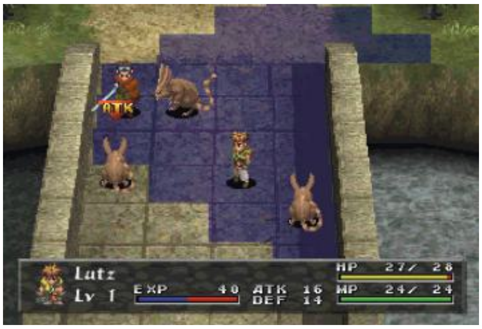
PlayStation
FOUR Amazing RPGs!
Arc the Lad Collection

The *Arc the Lad* trilogy was a latecomer to American audiences, so it felt a little outdated when it was released. Only the second one can really be considered a classic, though the others aren't bad either.

Luckily, the sequel made up for this, released the next year, in 1996. Its story initially focuses on a Hunter named Elc, whose village was destroyed when he was a child. A mission to defend against a terrorist attack goes off the rails when he discovers a mysterious girl named Lieza, who can talk to animals. It's revealed here that Arc is now a wanted criminal, and was seemingly involved with the destruction of Elc's village, but the two eventually come together, learn the truth, and save the land.

Arc the Lad II is a massive improvement over the original. The game is much longer, and includes overworld maps, towns, and shops. There are also the guild missions, which are mostly optional side quests for extra prestige and cash. The battle system has improved dramatically, with weapon and ability levels that increase with usage. You can improve items or craft your own, plus you can use Lieza's ability to talk with animals to draft certain monsters onto your team. Overall, it's an excellent game.





***Arc the Lad III* updates the graphic style, but it was made by a new team, and it shows.**

The success of the title in Japan led to a related anime series, plus two spinoffs – a Wonderswan Color SRPG called *Arc the Lad: Kijin Fukkatsu* ("Resurrection of the Machine God"), also starring Elc, and *Arc Arena* (a.k.a. *Arc the Lad: Monster Game with Casino Game*) for the PlayStation, which focuses entirely on the monster-battle arena from the main game.

Arc the Lad III moves the game on a few years, letting you explore the world after the fallout from the events of the second game. The new hero is Alec, who begins a quest to become a Hunter. While the hunting guild was an element of the second game, here it's pretty much the crux of the story, as you take on more missions to advance the plot. The visuals have been changed from pure 2D to 2D sprites on 3D backgrounds, so it looks a little more like a typical PlayStation RPG, for better or worse.

At this point G-Craft had been absorbed into Square, so this entry was largely made by a new team. And it shows, because neither the story nor the characterisation of pre-existing characters, are as good. Various elements have also been scaled back, with a much lower number of playable characters and missing systems, like the absence of the blacksmith and skill improvement mechanics. The end result is a game that's pretty good, but not really up to the level of its predecessor.

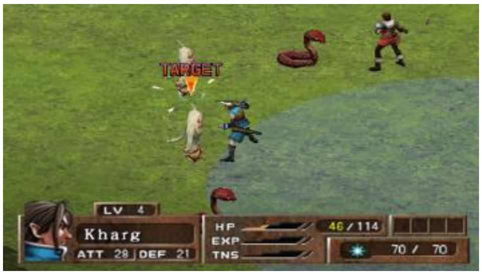
Initially, none of these games were released in English, but Working Designs eventually released a compilation pack in 2002 which included all three games plus the *Arc Arena* bonus disc. At this point they all seemed pretty outdated visually, but the flaws of the first game were also less apparent, considering you could beat it in a few days and then move immediately to the better sequel.

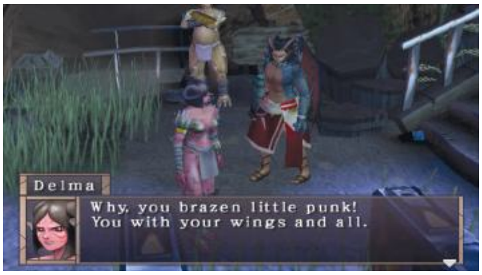
With the jump to the PlayStation 2, the series enters a whole new era, 1000 years after the initial trilogy. *Arc the Lad: Twilight of the Spirits* focuses on a world divided into humans and demon-like creatures called Deimos. There are two protagonists, the human warrior Kharg and the demon Darc, and the story switches viewpoints between them until they eventually team up. Given the millennium between this and the previous games, the storyline connections are fairly thin, though this also makes it an acceptable jumping-on point for new players. However, it feels like even less of an *Arc the Lad* game, largely due to the shift to 3D. The designers changed to Cattle Call, previously of the Atlus RPG *Tsugunai*. The character designs are totally different in style, and because it's an early PS2 title, it looks kinda ugly. The music is still pretty good, at least.

The battle system has changed, freeing the characters from grid movement, and instead allowing them to move within a defined radius. Similarly, each move has its own attack area, allowing you to target multiple enemies at once if they're close to each other. There is no MP; instead you use Spirit Stones to power magic or super-moves, which are either bought, found, or obtained from fallen enemies. Overall, the battle system is fairly decent, but the rest of the story drags, resulting in a game that's pretty middle-of-the-road, and disappointing for *Arc the Lad* fans.

But it was still better received than its sequel, *Arc the Lad: End of Darkness*. This stars a boy named Edda, this shifts the genre to action RPG, but unfortunately it plays very poorly. Characters from previous games are available in side-missions, but that doesn't really save the game. This spelled the end of the series, at least until a 2018 free-to-play mobile RPG called *Arc the Lad R*. Released only in Japan, it continues the story of the characters from the first two games.

***Twilight of the Spirits* was the last mainline SRPG in the series, and it's not bad, but it barely has any links to the other *Arc the Lad* games.**





PlayStation 2
Arc The Lad

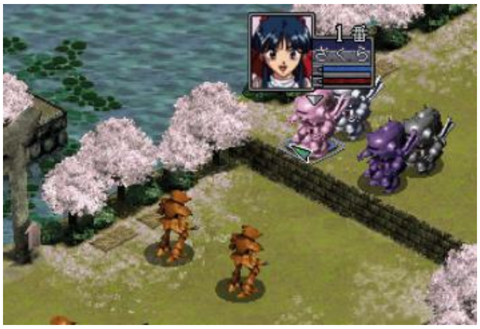
Sakura Wars (series)

Developer: SEGA/Red | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SAT, DC, PSP, PS2, PS4

SEGA's *Sakura Wars* (a.k.a. *Sakura Taisen*) is a wildly original concept – it's a hybrid of a turn-based SRPG like *Tactics Ogre* and a dating simulation like *Tokimeki Memorial*, taking place in Taisho-era (1920s) Japan, starring a troupe of women who do stage plays by day and fight demons, using gigantic mechas, by night. It tosses together a whole bunch of seemingly disparate pieces that somehow come together to create one of SEGA's most successful late '90s franchises. There's quite of a bit talent behind the series, including helmsman Ouji Hiroi (*Tengai Makyou*), character designer Kousuke Fujishima (*Oh My Goddess*, *Tales of Phantasia*), prolific writer Satoru Akahori, and composer Kouhei Tanaka (*Paladin's Quest*, *Just Breed*, *Alundra*).

The player sees the world through the eyes of Ichirou Ohgami, a Japanese Imperial Navy officer assigned to lead the Imperial Flower Combat Troupe, charged with fighting demons in Tokyo. Each of the game's ten chapters is divided into halves. During the first half, you control Ohgami as he walks around the theatre and interacts with the various characters. The game uses something called LIPS ("Live & Interactive Picture System"), which basically means that you have a time limit when selecting dialogue, and running out means that you've chosen to remain silent. (Later games also implement other interactive features, like choosing how loudly to say something, based on the analogue controls.) As typical for bishoujo games, Ohgami's relationships will deepen or sour based on his responses.

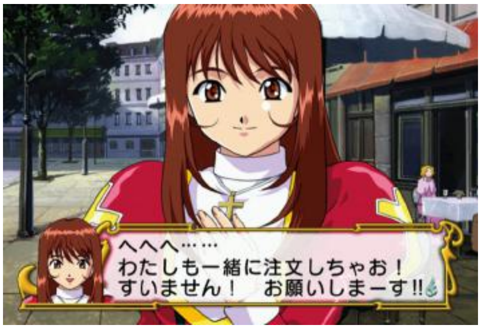
This is important for the second half of the chapter, when the demons attack. All of the characters hop into steam-powered mecha called Koubu, at which point the turn-based tactical part of the game begins. It functions similarly to typical SRPGs, except there are no experience levels or equipment. Instead, all of the stats and abilities are based on the character's feelings towards Ohgami, with favoured characters getting stronger. If certain conditions are met, you can also combine powers for super-attacks. Obviously, if a girl is knocked out of battle, then her affection decreases. Though the basic story doesn't really change, the choice of favoured character determines the ending.

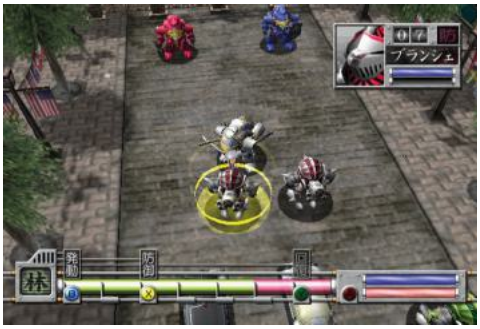


Bishoujo games live or die with their characters, and *Sakura Wars* has a diverse roster of personalities of different nationalities, all named after flowers. The main heroine is Sakura Shinguji, a traditional Japanese woman who's skilled with a sword, but others include the haughty, high-class Sumire; the karate-loving country girl, Kanna; the tough Russian fighter Maria; the quirky Chinese inventor Kohran; and the psychic teddy bear-loving 12-year-old Iris.

The first game was released for the Saturn in 1996, across two CDs. An instant success, it was followed up by a sequel two years later, subtitled *Kimi, Shinitamou Koto Nakare* ("Beloved, Thou Shalt Not Die"). The game is pretty similar, and has most of the same cast, albeit with a new

Kousuke Fujishima not only has a distinctive character art style but an excellent fashion sense, and his take on early 20th century fashion, as well as the Flower Troupe's distinctive uniforms, greatly helped shape the style of the series.


へへへ……
わたしも一緒に注文しちゃお！
すいません！　お願いしまーす!!



The Dreamcast *Sakura Wars* games were developed by a part of SEGA called Overworks. Some of the same staff would later go on to develop the *Valkyria Chronicles* series.

story and two new women: Reni, an androgynous child progeny from Germany, and Orihime, a hot-blooded half-Italian singer.

The third game moved to the Dreamcast and reset the stage from Japan to Paris, France. The third game, subtitled *Pari wa Moeteiru ka* ("Is Paris Burning") focuses on the Chattes Noires theatre, where the dancers dress as catgirls. The roster is entirely new, including the klutzy heroine (and nun-in-training) Erica, the high-class Glycine, the young orphan Coquelicot, the half-French half-Japanese noble Hanabi, and the devious criminal Lobelia. The 2D visuals have improved, due to the higher resolution of the Dreamcast, plus the battle scenes are now fully 3D. The tactical battle system has been changed too, now called ARMS (Active & Realtime Machine System) with each turn granting the character an action bar, allowing them to divide it between movement and attacks.

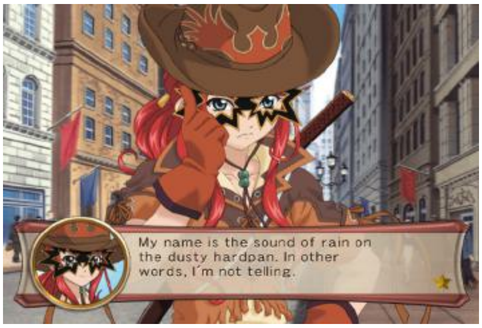
For the fourth game, subtitled *Koise yo Otome* ("Maidens, Fall in Love"), SEGA saw the death of the Dreamcast coming, and cobbled together something of a send-off, featuring the cast of both the Tokyo and Paris Flower Troupes. It's fairly short and inconsequential, to the point where it feels like a fan disc.

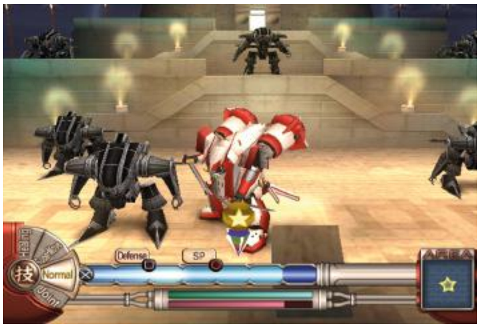
Up until this point, the video game series was basically Japan-only, outside of some Windows ports for territories like Russia. SEGA of America president Bernie Stolar prevented many RPGs from being localised, an attitude that felt shortsighted in light of the international JRPG boom arising out of *Final Fantasy VII* and the increasing popularity of anime and manga in North America in the late '90s. Nonetheless, the *Sakura Wars* name was known to fans of Japanese manga and anime, as the assorted tie-in products, like the anime TV and OVA series and the manga, were released in English. SEGA then attempted to relaunch the series, with the initial project being a remake of the first game for the PlayStation 2, in the style of the Dreamcast games. Subtitled *Atsuki Chishio ni* ("In Hot Blood"), this was intended for English release but somehow never made it across the ocean.

The next part of the project was a fifth entry for the series, which moved the action to the United States, finally marking its English debut. Playing as Ichirou Ohgami's nephew, Shinjirou Taiga, you are transferred to the American branch to helm the New York Combat Revue, which puts on Broadway-style shows. The heroine is Gemini Sunrise, a samurai cowboy, with other characters including Cheiron, a Harlem lawyer/bike gang leader; Diana, a sickly wheelchair-bound doctor; Rosita, a dimunative dancer/bounty hunter; and Subaru, a gender non-binary traditional Japanese dancer. However, the new cast failed to entertain the Japanese fanbase and the long delayed localisation, which was released by Nippon Ichi rather than SEGA, came far too late for anyone to notice.

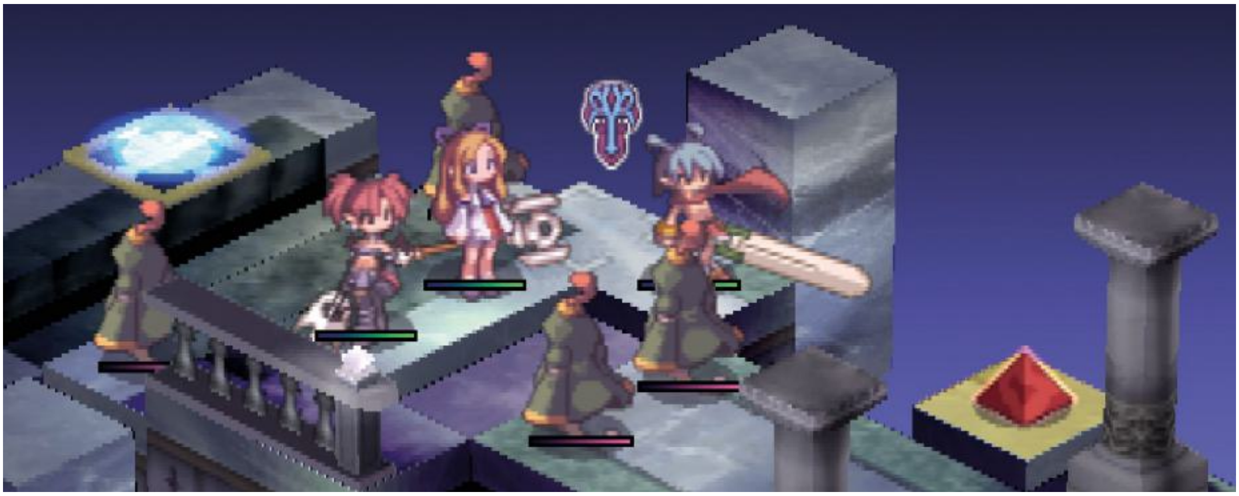
The series went under again until 2019, when SEGA resurrected it as *Shin* ("New") *Sakura Wars*. The series is again set in Japan and stars Seijuro Kamiyama as the new captain, with an all-new cast, except for classic character Sumire, now older and at a higher rank. The character designer has been changed to Tite Kubo, known for the anime/manga *Bleach*. However, the series shifts away completely from SRPG tactics to hack-and-slash combat. This was also released internationally in 2020, giving the franchise another chance at international stardom.

While the New York City setting includes familiar American landmarks like the Statue of Liberty and Times Square, the new cast failed to ignite the flames of passion of long-time Japanese fans.


My name is the sound of rain on the dusty hardpan. In other words, I'm not telling.



PlayStation 2
NIS



Disgaea (series)

Developer: Nippon Ichi | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): PS2, PS3, PS4, PSP, DS, PSV, WIN, NSW

Laharl

Who gives a damn about you?
Your new name is "Mid-Boss".

***Disgaea* was a surprise cult hit when it hit North America, thanks to its goofy sense of humour and insane customisation schemes.**

Nippon Ichi had joined the RPG bandwagon with its PS1 musical *Rhapsody*, before spinning it off into SRPG territory with its PS2 game *La Pucelle*. But it was really their second effort, *Disgaea*, that not only defined its style but found its international success, resulting in six core entries and several spinoffs.

Disgaea is a retelling of the war between heaven and hell, mostly focused on the hell part (or the netherworld, as *Disgaea* refers to it). There's fire and brimstone, but also a largely dysfunctional monarchy, led and operated by demons who run the gamut from being corrupt through arrogance to just plain incompetent. The characters are silly, the dialogue is often absurd, and even the items have silly joke descriptions. The weirdness is brought to life by Takehito Harada's cutesy, colourful character designs and Tenpei Sato's delightfully whimsical soundtracks.

On the surface, the game utilises the same setup as *Final Fantasy Tactics* – 2D sprites on 3D backdrops, with an isometric perspective – which even at the time of release in 2003 seemed a little old-fashioned. But it's the many unique quirks that give *Disgaea* its particular identity, setting it apart from others of its kind. There's a big emphasis on ganging up on foes and executing combos, either by attacking them simultaneously or by sticking characters into close proximity with each other. Characters can also pick up and throw units across the map, or even create towering stacks of soldiers. Additionally, some tiles on the battlefield are coloured – the properties of these tiles can be modified by tossing stones called Geo Symbols onto them. If you find a Geo Symbol that, say, increases your defence by 50%, toss it on a red tile. Now any character standing on a red tile will gain a 50% defence boost, whether it be friend or foe. The key is to manipulate the Geo Symbol in clever ways to give yourself the advantage.

Character customisation and creation plays an enormous part in these games too. There is a core cast of distinct characters in the game, but you can also create an army of other classes, that range from typical standbys like Archers or Mages, to weirder classes like Sentai Heroes and Zombie Maids. Particularly unique to Disgaea are Prinnies, which look like peg-legged penguins but are also souls of the damned, who are treated like cannon fodder, since they explode like bombs when tossed. There are systems whereby you can teach skills to other characters, or kill one, then reincarnate them complete with existing abilities, but in a new class. Using abilities repeatedly can also increase strength, resulting in a Pavlovian effect in which level-ups are constant and addictive.

Disgaea is also aware of SRPG tropes and looks for ways to play with or completely break them, one of the most interesting being the Item World. You see, within each and every piece of equipment in the game, there's a little world filled with mini inhabitants. You can shrink yourself and enter any item, which takes you to a randomly-generated dungeon. Making your way through this will eventually strengthen whatever

Sh-shut up!
A boss character never fights until the end!
That's common sense!

Fenrich
Steward
Allies/ Enemies
Display Move Range
Equip⇔Status
General Menu

***Disgaea* has angels, demons, vampires, werewolves, and exploding peg-legged penguins called Prinnies.**

item you've decided to adventure into. In a nod to democracy, there's also a senate called the Dark Assembly, where you can propose pre-determined bills to change aspects of the underworld, like making items in the shop cheaper. If it doesn't look like your measures will be supported, you can either bribe swing votes, or even try to beat them all into submission (not recommended if you're at a low level).

Most of these aspects are in place in the first game, though other features were added later, with even stranger ways to create, enhance, and customise your party. The second game introduces a Dark Court, where you can be issued summons for certain "criminal" actions, like killing too many enemies. The third game introduces the Class World, similar to the Item World, but even more abstract, since you're fighting to level up the stats of different character classes. This entry also introduces the Magichange ability that allows certain monsters to become weapons and be wielded by other characters. The fourth game allows you to capture enemies and "discipline" them to get bonuses or convince them to join your side.

Of course, with all of these different ways to manipulate characters and abilities, almost all pretence at balanced difficulty goes right out the window. The main story missions can either be overwhelming or completely trivial based on how you've built your party, since it's so open-ended.

The party-building aspect really is the focus of these games, compared to the pure strategy of something like *Fire Emblem*. They really are for people who like to figure out how games work and then proceed to break them. You can raise your character levels to the max of 9999 and do damage up into the millions, if you stick at it long enough. These games can theoretically last you hundreds of hours, though that's really only for those that want to put in that much time to elevate their stats to comical levels – the core story can be beaten and enjoyed without becoming exhausting.

Each game has a unique story, setting, and cast of characters. The first stars demon prince Laharl, who seeks to establish his place as ruler of the underworld with the help of his servant, the demon girl Etna, and a fallen angel named Flonne. The second focuses on the human Adell and his fight against the overlord Zenon, while the third takes place in a demon academy and stars an honour student named Mao. The fourth stars a vampire named Valvatorez and his werewolf companion Fenrich, who try to win an election and take over the demon government, while the fifth stars a demon named Killia as he ventures to various Netherworlds to recruit overlords to fight against a greater evil. These games are often populated with amusing secondary characters, friend and foe, like the goofy rock star Axel and baseball bat-wielding half-Prinny Fuka. The villain Vyers, who refers to himself as the Dark Adonis, is renamed Mid-Boss by the hero, following an appearance as an early, low level foe. And while the stories are separate, characters from previous games (and other Nippon Ichi games) make cameos.

While the specific features of each entry change from game to game, as the designers toyed with what worked and what didn't, assorted quality-of-life features were built into each successive game, making it a little hard to go back to earlier ones. However, most fans agree that the cast of the first game is probably the best, and the later ones never quite captured the same goofy sense of weirdness ... which is why it's the only game to have received a storyline sequel (*Disgaea D2*) and an HD remake (called *Disgaea 1 Complete*, though it doesn't change much, other than updating some visuals).

Though Nippon Ichi has created several other SRPGs, they regularly return to *Disgaea*, since it's their most popular, and arguably their best. In addition to an anime series, there are also two side-scrolling platformers featuring the Prinnies, as well as a visual novel called *Disgaea Infinite*.

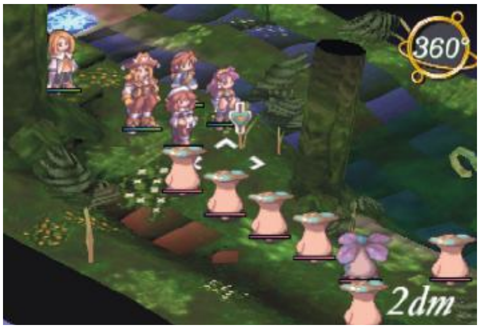
After the success of *Disgaea*, Nippon Ichi got quite experimental with its other franchises, though eventually they settled back into nurturing their flagship series.

36 dm
Seraphina
Gorgeous Overlord
HP
SP
ATK
DEF
INT
RES
HIT
SPD
RESISTANCES (%)
Camera Controls
Top View
Display Move Range & Bonus
Allies / Enemies
Menu

Seraphina
Now is no time to be calm, Sir Killia!
This is an emergency!!

La Pucelle: Tactics

Developer: Nippon Ichi | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): PS2, PSP



PlayStation.2
La Pucelle
TACTICS

La Pucelle* was originally skipped for localisation, but was later brought out internationally thanks to the success of *Disgaea.

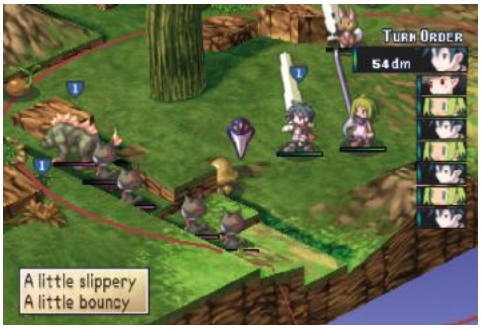
Although *Disgaea* is Nippon Ichi's most famous SRPG franchise, their first entry in the genre was actually *La Pucelle: Tactics*. It's a pseudo-sequel to the *Marl Kingdom* games, taking place a few centuries later, plus it removes all of the singing stuff, though it keeps the same goofy sense of humour. It stars a group of holy warriors from La Pucelle, a church organisation in charge of hunting down demons. The stars are brazen nun-in-training Prier, her little brother Culotte, and the calm and collected Alouette, as well as the stately knight Princess Eclair and the pirate Homard, who commands a squad of cat pirates. The art is by Ryoji, who also designed the *Marl Kingdom* games, so the art is a bit different from the Takehito Harada-designed characters of most later Nippon Ichi games.

Many of Nippon Ichi's SRPG mechanics began here, even though they're not quite fully fleshed out. When you attack an enemy, you're switched to a separate, side-view screen as the combatants exchange blows, with nearby characters joining the skirmish. There are also Dark Portals, which will not only spawn enemies, but also let off a flow of energy. By standing on them, you can direct this energy, which can be used to attack enemies; alternatively, if you can form a rectangle with these squares, they can decimate anything within their borders. You can also purify foes, in which case they may join you once you defeat them. There are 12 chapters, many with multiple endings.

La Pucelle is decent but unrefined, compared to its successors. A PSP port called *La Pucelle: Ragnarok* was also released in Japan, but was not published internationally.

Phantom Brave

Developer: Nippon Ichi | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): PS2, PSP, WII, WIN



PlayStation.2
Phantom Brave

***Phantom Brave's* story is both charming and harrowing, as poor Marona is often put through the emotional wringer.**

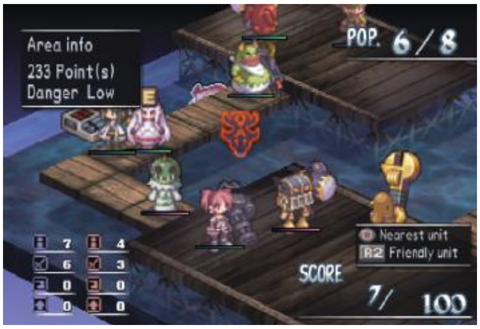
Phantom Brave takes place on a series of tropical islands. The star is Marona, an orphaned 12-year-old girl who can see phantoms, so she makes a living as a demon hunter. She's also possessed by Ash, a departed friend of her parents who basically acts as her father figure.

The mechanics of *Phantom Brave* have moved on from those of *Disgaea*. The battlefield removes the grids in favour of free movement, with a character being able to move within a specific radius. But, more strangely, almost all of the characters are phantoms. Since they have no corporeal form, you choose objects on the battlefield for them to inhabit, each with different stat modifiers. For example, rocks will grant high HP but slow movement, while trees will give higher magic power but weaker defence. Plus, phantoms can also only stay on the battlefield for a limited number of turns before disappearing. So you need to form strategies based on strengthening Marona (who is the only character who can stick around for unlimited turns), and doing as much damage as possible with the others before they go up in smoke. Unit order is also determined by speed instead of being organised into turns.

The story is also much more serious and melodramatic than *Disgaea*'s, focusing on Marona's loneliness, the villagers who hate her for her powers (even though she works to protect them), and her search for her parents. But there's still some goofiness and plenty of colourful characters, like the Owl Ninjas. It's tough to wrap your head around it, but once you do, it's easily as charming and compelling as other Nippon Ichi SRPGs.

Makai Kingdom

Developer: Nippon Ichi | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): PS2, PSP



PlayStation.2
MAKAI KINGDOM

After the dramatic departures in mechanics and tone of *Phantom Brave*, *Makai Kingdom* (known, strangely enough, as *Phantom Kingdom* in its native Japan) reels things back a bit, returning to the tone of *Disgaea*. It stars Zetta, a self-proclaimed "freaking badass overlord" whose arrogant actions end up with him getting confined to a book. He seeks the aid of Pram, a devilish oracle with a sarcastic sense of humour. However, you don't get to control them (or any of the other silly overlords that lend their hands) but rather focus entirely on player-created units.

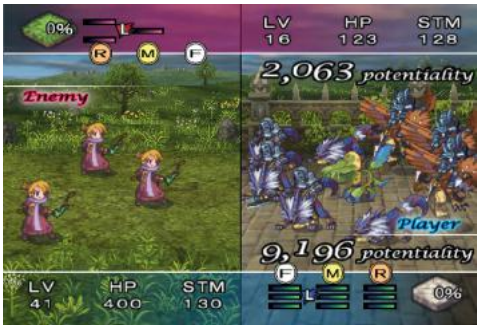
The stages in *Makai Kingdom* are randomly generated, with each starting on a very small battlefield. By destroying a Key unit, a new area is unlocked, and you can move on. The goal isn't just to beat everything, but rather to gain enough points, at which point you can leave. It keeps the free movement of *Phantom Brave*, plus adds things like buildings you can place on the battlefield, which give assorted bonuses as long as they stand, plus a wider arsenal, including weapons like rifles and bombs, and rideable vehicles like tanks and mechas.

The game is kind of a mess – each area on the battlefield has a different set of textures, which creates an inconsistent look, plus Tenpei Sato only supplied a few music tracks, with the rest given to freelancers. Plus, the crazy overlords are fun, but you don't see enough of them. Still, there's plenty of silly bits, like the way that your characters appear by being rocketed into the battlefield, as well as flashy attack animations. Overall, *Makai Kingdom* is a fine game – its quirks, while numerous, are all minor and forgiveable.

***Makai Kingdom* feels more cobbled together than other SRPGs, but its core elements are still very much intact.**

Soul Nomad & the World Eaters

Developer: Nippon Ichi | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): PS2



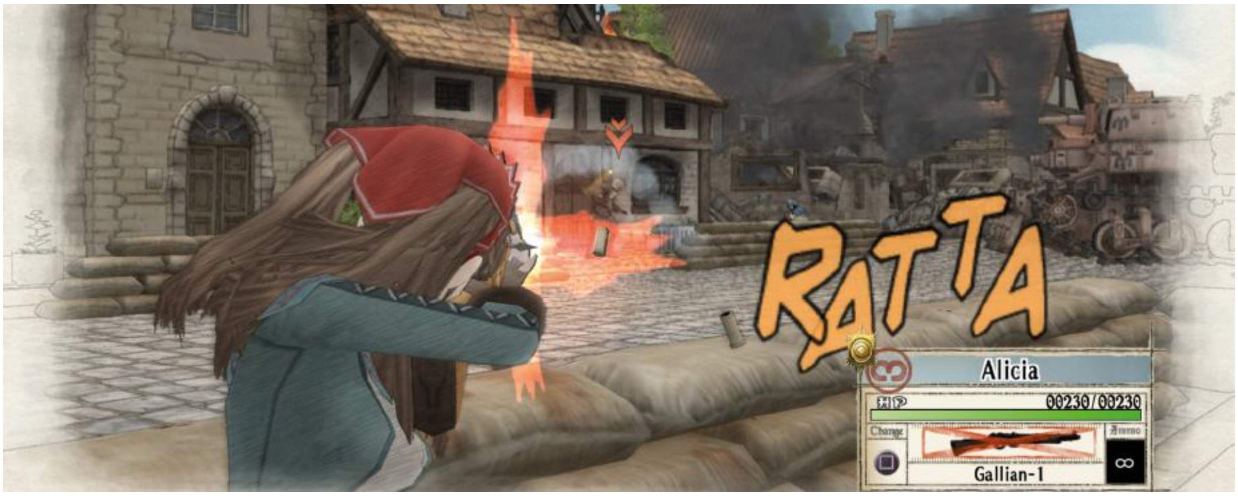
PlayStation.2
SOUL NOMAD

Soul Nomad messes with the tactics RPG formula far more than *Phantom Brave* or *Makai Kingdom* ever did. It takes place on a ruined world that used to be ruled by beings called World Eaters, who have been lying dormant for quite some time. The player's avatar (which can be male or female) emerges from hiding to explore the world, although they are actually possessed by Gig, the spirit of the World Eater ruler, who wants nothing more than to take over the Earth once again. There is an alternate path you can take, if you wish to follow Gig.

The battlefield is quite different, as the fields are all flat, drawn maps that your characters move across, rather than the standard 3D terrain. When you attack another unit, you get a close-up battle in which both squads duke it out. Individual units consist of a leader and several soldiers placed in different formations, who have different skills depending on where they're placed. These are hugely customisable, though the terminology is a little odd. These formations are called Rooms, which are randomly generated, and you are charged rent money based on which units are placed within. You can also place items called Decor to modify stats, and perform Inspections, which work similarly to the Item World in *Disgaea*, being randomly-generated stages to increase the Room's abilities.

The tone, as well as the character art by Toi8, is much darker than in other Nippon Ichi games. It is their most innovative title, which is saying something considering how off-the-wall their mechanics can get, but they unfortunately decided to play it safe after this game, primarily relying on *Disgaea* sequels after the end of the PS2 era.

Most of Nippon Ichi's SRPGs have had ports from their initial PlayStation 2 releases, except *Soul Nomad*, which indicates its tepid reception, if not its quality.



Valkyria Chronicles (series)

Developer: SEGA/Media.Vision | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): PS3, PS4, WIN, NSW, PSP

SEGA's *Sakura Wars* series took a break after the fifth entry for the PlayStation 2, leaving room for another strategy RPG to take its place. And thus was born *Valkyria Chronicles*, initially released for the PlayStation 3 in 2008. Relating the story of a fictional war on a continent that's an awful lot like Europe, it focuses on the neutral nation of Gallia, as it's invaded by the East Europan Imperial Alliance, which seeks control of its bountiful resources of a powerful ore called Ragnite.

Since Gallia doesn't have much of a regular military, its combatants consist entirely of conscripted citizens who have picked up arms to defend their country. The hero of the first game, Welkin Gunther, would rather study nature than pilot tanks, while fellow combatant Alicia Melchiott is really just a baker. The diverse cast of scrappy characters, designed by artist Raita Honjou, makes for compelling storytelling, as even minor characters have their own personality traits, and fight better next to characters they get along with. (There's even a few cameo characters from the SEGA RPG *Skies of Arcadia*.) The story is basically an anime World War II, though rather than rockets or nuclear bombs, its weapons of mass destruction are members of an ancient warrior race of battle maidens called Valkyria, who possess enormous magical powers. The key antagonist is the blue-haired Selvaria, fighting on the side of the Imperials, who appears on the front cover and shows up in other games in the series. In spite of its fantastical elements, the characters give it a really down-to-earth feeling.

Valkyria Chronicles plays a bit differently from most Japanese strategy RPGs, using what it calls the BLiTZ (Battle of Live Tactical Zones) system. The battlefield is presented as a military war-room map, with emblems representing each

I thought I would be ready for this.
I knew war meant this might happen.

unit. When a unit is selected, the camera zooms into their perspective, as you control them on the 3D battlefield, and get them into position to attack enemies. A unit only has so much stamina for movement, but is allowed to attack once before its turn is up. In each turn, you get a number of Medals, which are used to command any unit. In other words, you can command the same unit to act multiple times, but each time its selected, it has less stamina, and can't move as far. Units include Scouts, which have the greatest movement range but are stuck with weak rifles; Shocktroopers, which wield powerful machine guns; and Lancers, which carry heavy rocket launchers. You also have command of a tank, which is easily more powerful than human units, but has limited mobility, and generally also needs an Engineer unit to walk alongside it to perform maintenance. Also, tanks have a big glowing weak point on their rear – they're difficult to take down from the front due to their heavy armour, but a single Lancer rocket to the back will heavily incapacitate it, if not outright destroy it. As with many strategy games, positioning is of the utmost importance. Even when it's not their turn, certain units will open fire on opposing combatants if they get close enough, so it's best to sneak up

PLAYSTATION 3
VALKYRIA
CHRONICLES
SEGA

Many SRPGs fit nicely into the *Tactics Ogre* or *Fire Emblem* model, so *Valkyria Chronicles* branching out into a movement system is a nice change of pace.

from behind. When aiming, you can also chose to aim at the body, or at the head, the latter having a lower probability of success, but doing much more damage.

It's a thrilling system, since the character movement puts the player right into the battlefield, hiding behind grass or buildings to avoid enemy fire while trying to find an opening. The game uses a graphical style that features cel-shaded characters, giving everything the feeling of a painting in motion. Combined with the comic book-style sound effect words that pop up during the action, it's thrilling to play in a way that most SRPGs don't allow: you're not just pointing and clicking. And while Hitoshi Sakimoto may be stereotyped as the "SRPG soundtrack guy" thanks to his work on *Tactics Ogre* and *Ogre Battle*, it's hard to say he doesn't do a great job here.

The biggest downside lies in the game's mission design, as some scenarios are extremely difficult unless you know when and where enemies will show up, though this is a common issue with strategy RPGs. Unit customisation is also restrictive, as you simply level up unit classes rather than individual characters, though this also prevents certain characters from becoming too weak. But otherwise it's an outstanding title, and while it wasn't enormously popular, it gained enough fans to continue the franchise.

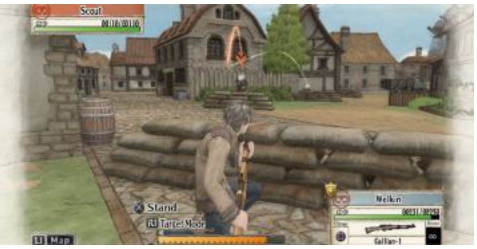
Alas, SEGA really didn't handle the subsequent games correctly. The sequel was released for the PlayStation Portable, making for a large technical downgrade from the initial PlayStation 3 game. It still looks good, considering the weaker hardware, but the change does affect the gameplay, particularly the smaller maps, which are typically broken into even smaller chunks. The story focuses on a civil war in Gallia, and changes the location to a military training academy full of teenagers, resulting in more juvenile characters and storytelling. The unit customisation has been expanded, but you may need to spend more time grinding to get the units you want. It's not unplayable but it is a marked step down from its predecessor.

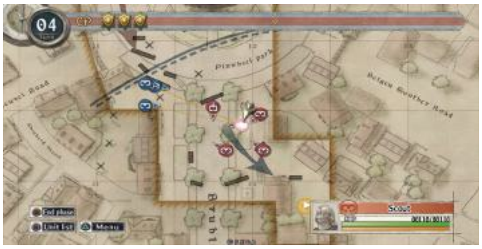
The third game was also for the PSP, though recognising the storytelling issues of the second title, it refocuses the story on a penal black ops unit during the Gallian war. It's a much better story, on the level of the first game, though overall it still suffers from the same technical restraints, as well as some reused maps. Unfortunately, due to sluggish sales of the PSP outside of Japan, the game was not localised into English, though it was eventually translated by fans.

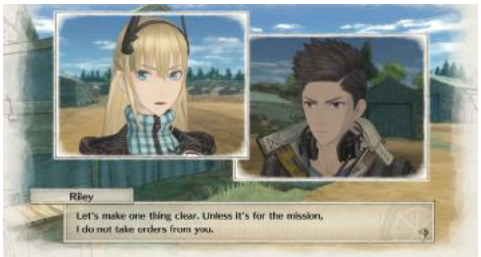
Though left dormant for a number of years, the *Valkyria* name was resurrected for the ill-received action RPG spinoff *Valkyria Revolution*. Despite sharing some terminology, there isn't much connection to the main series, and it loses the unique visual style too. Unfortunately, this is quite a poor effort, with simple battlefield action segments that are often braindead easy, until the sudden wild difficulty spikes. It's also weighed down by aimless, terribly-directed cutscenes and long loading times; the only decent thing about it is a soundtrack by Yasunori Mitsuda.

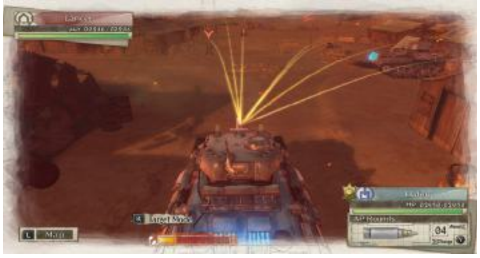
Thankfully, *Valkyria Chronicles 4* was released the next year in 2018 to wash away the terrible taste of *Valkyria Revolution*. Released for HD consoles, it's a return to form for the series, as it looks and plays much like the first game. Additions include a new unit, a Grenadier, which can lob bombs great distances, as well as several new scenarios that take place in an arctic setting. On its own, it's an excellent title, but at the same time, it feels like barely anything has advanced in the decade between this entry and the first one. The story doesn't add much, the characters and writing are slightly worse, it looks and sounds almost identical, and the improved mechanics don't really change much.

In spite of its mishandling, there's no doubt *Valkyria Chronicles* is one of strongest of its type, and at very least, the first and fourth entries (and arguably the third) are essential for SRPG fans.

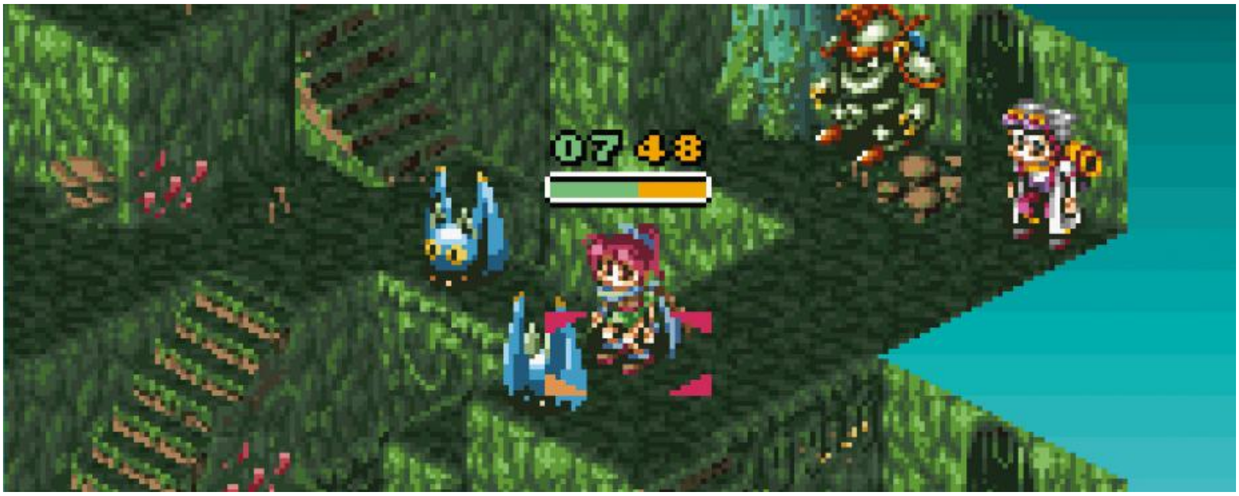





Riley
Let's make one thing clear. Unless it's for the mission,
I do not take orders from you.



Valkyria Chronicles' cel-shaded art style makes it look like a war painting in motion, as in the fourth entry pictured here.



Energy Breaker

Developer: Neverland | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SFC

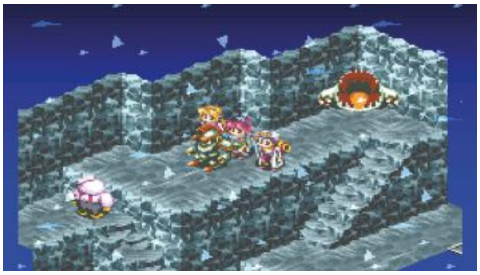
Myra is a young woman living a peaceful life in the village of Olga, who has no recollection of her past. A dream sends her off adventuring, teaming her up with an eccentric inventor, Lenardo, and they often cross paths with the mysterious, blue-haired swordsman Leon, who seems to be tied to her previous, unknown life.

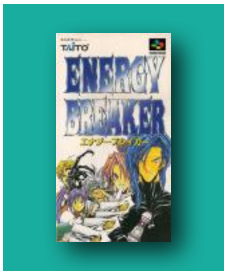
Neverland had previously developed the two *Lufia* games for the SNES, both of which were decent, albeit typical, role-playing games, but *Energy Breaker* is anything but. The game is a mixture of traditional JRPG exploration and tactical RPG combat, à la *Tactics Ogre*. The entire game is viewed from an isometric perspective, as Myra explores towns and maps (though the overworld is handled via menu selections). Certain screens will trigger encounters with enemies, which switch the game into turn-based mode while you fight them. These battles are typically pretty short, often resolving within a few turns (there's a turn limit anyway), though they can recur if you revisit the area.

Most SRPGs let a unit move and attack once in each turn. In *Energy Breaker*, each character has a maximum of 12 BP per turn, which they can spend on various actions. Moving consumes 5 BP, regular attacks consume 4, and so on. So, providing you don't move your character, they can attack three times in a single turn. Therefore, there's quite a bit of flexibility in how you can position and guide your units. There are five main units, plus a sixth unit named Gulliver, a flying robot who can't attack but can take an infinite amount of damage, making him useful as a defensive tool.

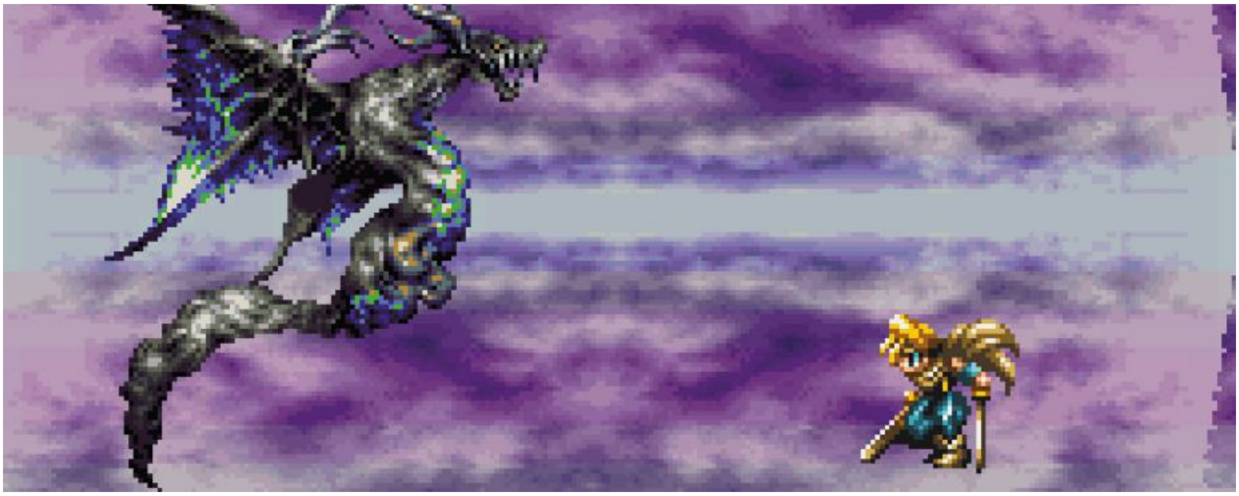
However, their health also affects how much BP is regenerated after each turn, so weaker units can't act quite as often. Also unique is the character customisation, which is what the title refers to. Each unit has a positive or negative amount of each of four elements – earth, wind, fire, and water, and you can allocate a certain number of PP energy points to these. These are capped, but when you level up, you can choose to raise those maximum amounts. During the adventure, you obtain grimoires, which will list the energy distribution requirements to learn certain skills. The interface makes this all difficult to manage, but it's an interesting system once you wrap your head around it.

There's quite a bit of detail in the game world. There are tons of hidden items to find, and a lot of evocative text when investigating various areas. The conversation system allows you to inquire about certain topics, show key items, or even adjust your attitude (friendliness or hostility), though in practice, it doesn't affect a whole lot. The character designs by Yasuhiro Nightow (*Trigun*) are attractive, and the story is solid too, dealing with weighty philosophical issues around science and religion, as was popular in RPGs of this era. Even in Japan, it's a mostly unknown cult classic, largely due to its very late release in the Super Famicom's life, but it certainly deserves to be much better recognised.



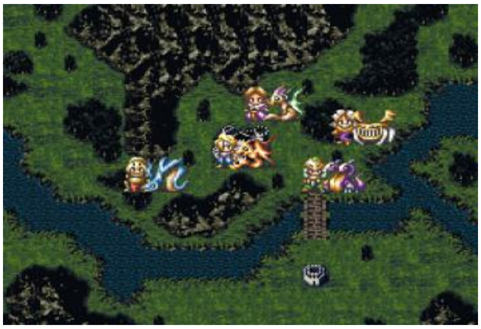


The innovative SRPG mechanics and excellent story turn *Energy Breaker* into one of the best titles of its era.



Bahamut Lagoon

Developer: Square | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SFC



Bahamut Lagoon
SQUARESOFT

While Square already had the mecha game *Front Mission* as their primary SRPG staple, they also developed *Bahamut Lagoon*, another title in the genre that adheres more closely to the style and aesthetic of their *Final Fantasy* series. The game takes place on the world of Orelus, which consists of a number of small land masses, called lagoons, floating in the sky. The game begins when the Granbelos Empire invades the Kingdom of Kahna, in order to unite the continents under its rule. As Byuu, the commander of the Kahna Dragon Squad, you and your fellow soldiers put up an admirable fight, but it's a lost cause – the kingdom falls, the princess Yoyo is kidnapped, and everyone flees to safety. Years pass, and eventually everyone regroups to take back their kingdom, save the princess, and defeat Granbelos.

Bahamut Lagoon has a few unique features, specifically in the way it breaks down its units. Each unit actually consists of four soldiers, so when they attack another, you're given a separate side-view battle screen on which you pick commands, and they exchange blows. Each soldier also has a class affiliation, giving them various strengths and weaknesses, so you can rearrange your characters to have, say, a squad mainly of Heavy Armour fighters, which are super-strong but can't move very far, balanced a bit by sticking in a Light Armour fighter.

Additionally, each unit is accompanied by a dragon, to which you can give a name. Since they are beasts, they act of their own accord, though they do listen to basic commands to attack, fall back, or hold in place. Over the course of the game, you can develop these dragons by feeding various items to them. Not only does this affect their affinities and stats, but also their loyalty, which determines how well they'll listen to you during fights, even joining the squad-level skirmishes if they like you enough. Between the unit customisation and the dragon raising, there's quite a bit of depth here, but compared to other SRPGs like *Fire Emblem* or *Tactics Ogre*, it's also not nearly as difficult.

The story takes the best of Square, in that it's a decent fantasy story with bits of odd comedy. Byuu is a silent protagonist, but there are plenty of weird characters in your party, like the occasionally senile old man Sendak, the overly proud knight Matelite, or the underling Bikkebakke, who kindly asks that you refrain from making fun of his name. But the most unusual is Yoyo, the captured princess, technically the main protagonist – despite being set up as a love interest for Byuu, she ends up deeply subverting this trope.

The visuals are brilliant, with the high level of pixel artwork Square is known for – the dragon designs are resplendent, the battle character sprites larger and clearer than in most of their other games, and the shots of the lagoons floating in the clouds were made to show off the SFC Mode 7 effects. Altogether, it's one of the best SRPGs of the era.

One of the late SFC releases from Square, *Bahamut Lagoon* has everything the company is known for – excellent visuals, outstanding music, interesting mechanics ... and some cool as heck dragon designs.

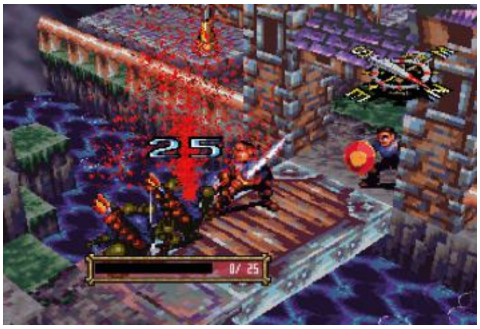
Vandal Hearts (series)

Developer: Konami | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): PS1, X360, PS3

In the world of *Vandal Hearts*, the monarchy has been overthrown and democracy has been granted to the citizens of the newly created Republic of Ishtaria. Things aren't exactly going well though, with crime running rampant and conspiracies afoot within the government. It's up to a few key members of the Ishtarian Security Force, including hero Ash Lambert, to bring justice back to the land.

This is a pretty typical SRPG, using an isometric perspective, à la *Tactics Ogre*, with 2D sprites on a 3D background. The class system is fairly similar to *Fire Emblem*'s (mêlée fighters are strong against archers, archers are strong against flying hawkmen, and hawkmen are strong against mêlée fighters); even the class promotion system works similarly, as you choose to upgrade when characters reach certain experience levels. Its place in history isn't due to any particular innovation, but rather because it was one of the first on the system. Released in 1996 in Japan, and other markets in 1997, it beat *Final Fantasy Tactics* to the market by nearly a year. SRPGs were also extremely rare in North America, with most gamers of the time really only familiar with *Shining Force*. *Vandal Hearts* is more linear – there are towns and shops, though they're all menu-based – but the story is decent and the battles are challenging and well designed, even if the systems aren't terribly complex. It's mostly memorable for the enormous and striking blood fountains that spurt whenever a character is slain, but even without that, it's a pretty decent early effort.

By the time a sequel came out in 1999, *Vandal Hearts II* was up against more serious competition from other SRPGs, so it needed to stand out a little more. The story is completely new, focusing on a boy named Joshua and taking place over the course of his life, as his country is torn by civil war. There are multiple endings, depending on your choices. The main difference here is how character turns work – normally you move a character and then their turn ends, but here, enemies move simultaneously with your character. It makes combat unnecessarily complicated, since you can target an enemy, only for it to saunter out of your range. Most players couldn't get past this, and thus the game was met with a poor reception.



Vandal Hearts was resurrected for a third game, technically a prequel, a digital download for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. Subtitled *Flames of Judgment*, it was developed by Western studio Hijinx Studios. The main character is Tobias, an orphan of war, whose church is mysteriously attacked. Gameplay-wise, it takes after the original *Vandal Hearts* rather than its sequel, though it moves to a queue-based turn system. The character artwork is distinctly Western and a huge departure from the original. As a cheap way to indulge in turn-based strategy, a genre rare on consoles at the time, it's just barely acceptable, but its low budget is very apparent.

Vandal Hearts
PlayStation

As an early PS1 SRPG, *Vandal Hearts* is a solid entry in the genre, even though later games have surpassed it.

LV 8
HP 76/ 76
BP 72/ 89

Black/Matrix (series)

Developer: Flight-Plan | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): SAT, PS1, DC, GBA, PS2

LV 30
HP 276/276
BP 59/ 81

BLACK/MATRIX
SEGA SATURN

Its religious iconography and apocalyptic themes ensured that *Black/Matrix* was probably too niche to be localised at the time.

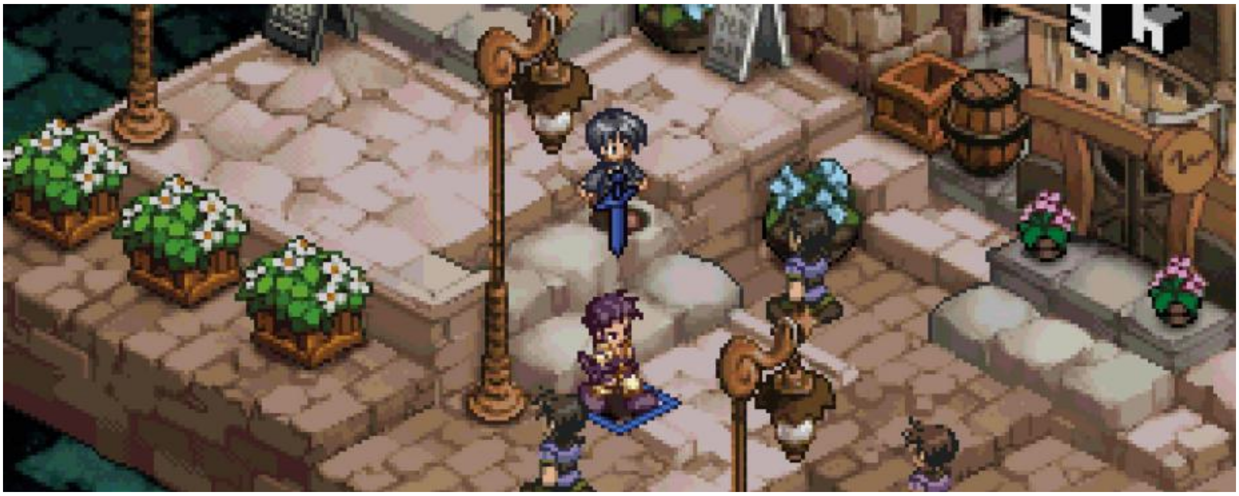
Flight-Plan's *Black/Matrix* takes place in a world based on the Bible, except that the roles of good and evil are reversed. Here, virtues such as love, equality, and freedom are viewed as sins, while greed, anger, and lust are praised. Humans are born with wings, whose colour determines their class – those with black wings are the rulers, while those with white are slaves. You control a young white-winged man named Abel, in service to a black-winged master. Curiously, while the player character is set, you pick your master from one of five women, though a man can also be chosen by entering a code. The master has fallen in love with Abel, something that is strictly forbidden, and they are separated. Left in prison to rot, Abel discovers he has the ability to change the wings of humans from black to white, making everyone to believe him to be the saviour of their kind. They escape, and Abel's quest to rescue his beloved master eventually leads to full scale war.

At its core, *Black/Matrix* is an isometric SRPG, very similar to *Tactics Ogre*. The main difference is that magic and weapon crafting are handled via Blood Points, harvested from fallen enemies. Time flows during battle, at the pace of an hour per turn, and various spells have different properties depending on when they're cast. At the end of each encounter, you're graded on your performance and given items, as well as an experience pool you can divide among your team. The music consists largely of rap and hip-hop, an unusual sound for a game like this.

Black/Matrix saw a remake for the Dreamcast, called *Black/Matrix AD* (for "advanced") which revamps the visuals and greatly expands the story. In the original Saturn version, there's one (rather sad) ending, but this port adds a few alternative paths, plus a greater role for the masters, whose presence was previously minimal. However, the artist was changed from Kyoko Tsuchiya to Kazuhiro Soeta. A second remake, released for the PlayStation and called *Black/Matrix+*, is largely based on the Dreamcast release, but with the original Saturn artwork. However, a number of events have been cut from this version, so there's no ideal port.

The series continued, but it never quite found the same success. *Black/Matrix II* takes place in a separate universe, where everything is divided between heaven, hell, and the human world. It moved the series to 3D, though the visuals are quite ugly. The battle system is similar, though, and there is still some plot branching, with four heroines to choose from. A third game called *Black/Matrix Zero* was released for the Game Boy Advance and PlayStation; this removes the Blood Points but adds in summoned creatures called Pain Killers.

Black/Matrix was the first of its type from Flight-Plan, who later created *Summon Night*, another SRPG series that's much brighter in tone; it became their most popular series and outlived the company's closure.



Summon Night (series)

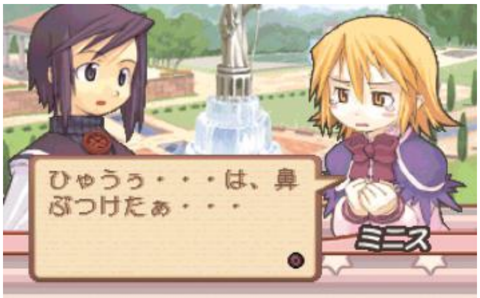
Developer: Flight-Plan/Felistella/Media.Vision | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2, PS4, DS and more

Japanese developer Flight-Plan started out with the *Black/Matrix* SRPG series, but its *Summon Night* franchise was really its flagship. Including the first entry released for the PlayStation in 2000, there have been a total of 13 games, some dating from after the developer went out of business, all published by Banpresto.

Most of the games take place in the medieval fantasy world of Lyndbaum, which functions using a mixture of magic and science, and is surrounded by various other worlds, each with its own unique civilisation. The protagonist of the first game, chosen from among two boys and two girls, comes from a world that's basically Earth. Most of the subsequent games also offer a choice of protagonists, typically a boy or a girl. Since all of the games take place among these worlds, mostly around the same era, there are various characters who recur in all of the games, even though each game has its own story and protagonist. Combined with the large assortment of tie-in materials (novels, drama CDs, and so forth), and character illustrations by fantasy artist Takeshi Iizuka (also known for *Kino's Journey*), it paints a richly detailed world that earned itself quite a number of fans.

Throughout the '90s, SRPGs were mostly thought of as a hardcore fan genre, owing to the complexity of games like *Fire Emblem* and *Tactics Ogre*. Even games with broader target audiences, like *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Shining Force*, could be seen as too hard for people that weren't already RPG fans. *Summon Night* was mostly aimed at an even larger gaming audience, with pretty straightforward mechanics and a fairly moderate difficulty level. These are what's known as "character games" in Japan – in other words, products where the emphasis is more on the story and characters than on the gameplay itself. The characters might look cutesy, but the games are definitely not "moe", because the themes can get pretty dark, especially for the Summoned characters or creatures, who are often treated like slaves.

Which isn't to say that *Summon Night* is cheap or badly made – Flight-Plan had already proved itself to be more than competent in the past, after all. The core gameplay isn't much different from that in other SRPGs, and the original PlayStation version doesn't look all that much different from something like a slightly cheerier *Tactics Ogre*, complete with 2D visuals and an isometric perspective. As suggested by the title, characters can Summon various creatures by combining an item with one of their accessories, which then determines what kind of magic it can cast. After battle, you're also given a pool of experience that you can assign to your characters as you desire, rather than having them level up based on how they attack, as in most other SRPGs. Most chapters are broken up into three segments: an adventure section, in which you select spots on the map and advance the story; a battle segment and a night-time conversation, in which you can



ひゅうぅ・・・は、鼻
ぶつけたぁ・・・

SUMMON NIGHT

***Summon Night* was aimed at casual SRPG fans, and was Flight Plan's gravy train for quite awhile, consisting of several core SRPG games, as well as numerous spin-offs.**

Pratty

I can't be your husband!
I'm a girl!!

45
108
0
Guard

GAME BOY ADVANCE
Summon Night
Swordcraft Story

The first *Summon Night* games released in English were the *Swordcraft Story* spinoffs, which are completely different gameplay-wise, but keep the character-focused stories.

chat with one of your teammates to enhance your bond with them and learn more about them. These can affect the route through the story, and ultimately the ending.

The first two games were released on the PlayStation and then ported to the DS; the third and fourth games made it to the PlayStation 2 and were later ported to the PSP. *Summon Night 5,* made for the PSP, was released after Flight-Plan went under, and was developed by Felistella, formed by former staff members, working in conjunction with Compile Heart. *Summon Night 6,* for both the PlayStation 4 and PS Vita, came from Media.Vision, known for the *Wild Arms* and some of the *Valkyria Chronicles* games. The latter two games changed from 2D units to 3D models. Only the fifth and sixth entries were released internationally, localised by Gaijinworks, the successor to Working Designs. Alas, neither is particularly liked by series fans, for a variety of reasons (questionable balance, and basically being too different from the older games), but English speakers will also miss out on the many references to past games. This is a particularly big issue for *Summon Night 6,* which is meant as a crossover.

Since *Summon Night* was a "character game" series, many of its spinoffs shifted to other genres. These are of varying quality and don't always connect to the core series, in some cases featuring characters from different artists or taking place in worlds other than Lyndbaum. The first among these is the *Swordcraft Story* games, a trilogy released for the Game Boy Advance, starting in 2003. These play a little more like typical JRPGs and are focused on dungeon exploration, as well as crafting new weapons, as the title implies, since you play as novice blacksmiths. The battle system is action-based and presented from a side-scrolling perspective, and plays like the ones in Namco's *Tales* games, in which the player is aided by one of a handful of Guardian Beasts. Although vastly different from the main series, English speakers can still feel its influence through the colourful characters and dialogue, even though the stories themselves are pretty typical. The first game in particular is somewhat infamous for its focus on "yuri" (girl-girl romance), something not often presented to an American RPG audience in 2006, especially on the Game Boy Advance. The heroes from the first two games cameo in these games as well, though they'd be unknown to English-speaking audiences. The first two games in this trilogy were localised by Atlus.

This was followed up by *Summon Night Ex-These: Yoake no Tsubasa* ("Wings of Dawn"), an action RPG for the PlayStation 2, in 2005. This game puts you in control of two souls, a man and a woman, who inhabit the same body; you can switch control to either at will. This was followed up by *Summon Night Gran-These: Horobi no Tsurugi to Yakusoku no Koshi* ("The Sword of Destruction and the Knight of the Promise") in 2010. In between these two games was *Summon Night: Twin Age,* released for the DS, another action RPG in which you control two characters (AI managing the third companion) using the stylus and touch screen. Unlike the PS2 entries, this one was released in North America, again by Atlus. *Summon Night X: Tears Crown* is a more typical JRPG, released for the DS and co-developed by Think and Feel.

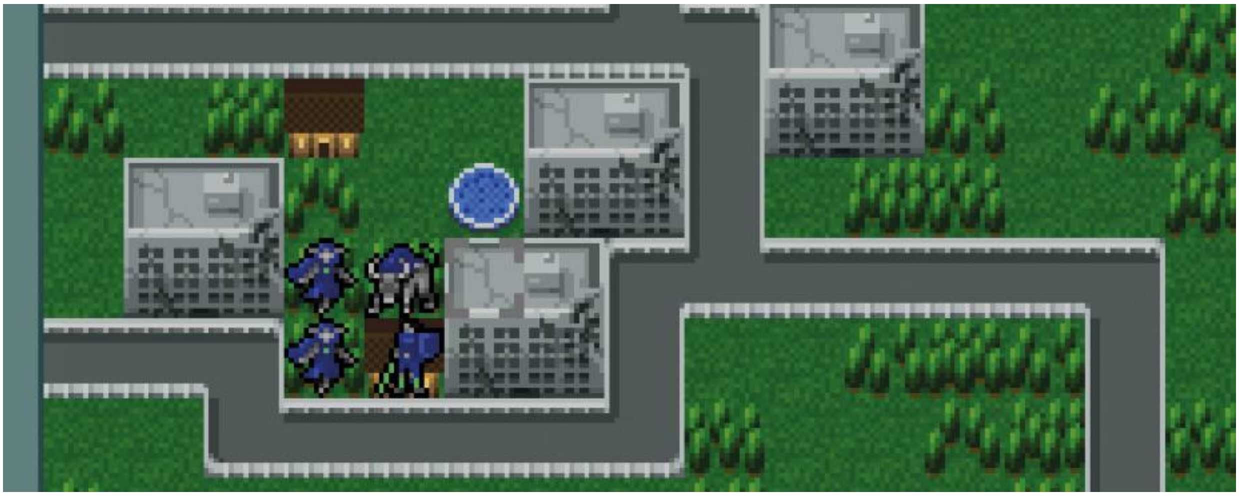
In addition to *Summon Night* and *Black/Matrix,* there were a few other self-published games for the PlayStation 2: *Dragon Shadow Spell,* which stars a hero who has a pet dragon, and *Sacred Blaze,* which casts the player as a god who can grant your characters various abilities.

Raj

It's just so new and... well, weird to have new people to talk to! Puts a smile on my face.

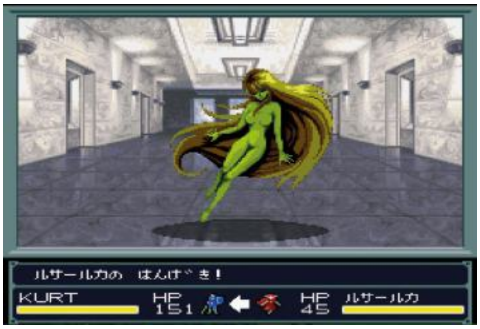
Raj
Counterattack

Summon Night 6, the last in the series, is a crossover event with characters from all of the other games ... most of which were never released in English.



Majin Tensei (series)

Developer: Atlus | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SFC, SAT



Long before *Devil Survivor*, there was *Majin Tensei*, a trio of *SMT* strategy spinoffs. The first *Majin Tensei* is a bleak, story-light retelling of *Shin Megami Tensei* – 20 years after the fall of Neo Tokyo, our protagonist receives an email from the mysterious TAKEUCHI, with an attachment containing demon-summoning software. After fighting through the ruins, he partners with a mysterious woman with the ability to summon demons through magic. These two, and their growing platoon, head deep into the underworld to confront Lucifer. As it's an *SMT* offshoot, you can negotiate with demons for their allyship, as well as fuse them.

Looking similar to *Fire Emblem*, *Majin Tensei*'s map screen appears dated for 1994, with small unit sprites and simplistic art, but the battle scenes are absolutely dazzling. When two units meet in combat, the screen transitions to show one of Kazuma Kaneko's iconic demons, displayed as an impressively large and detailed sprite. *Majin Tensei* handily boasts the best-looking bestiary of all the 16-bit *SMT* games. It's also got one of the best soundtracks, filled with industrial dance tracks by the late Hidehito Aoki.

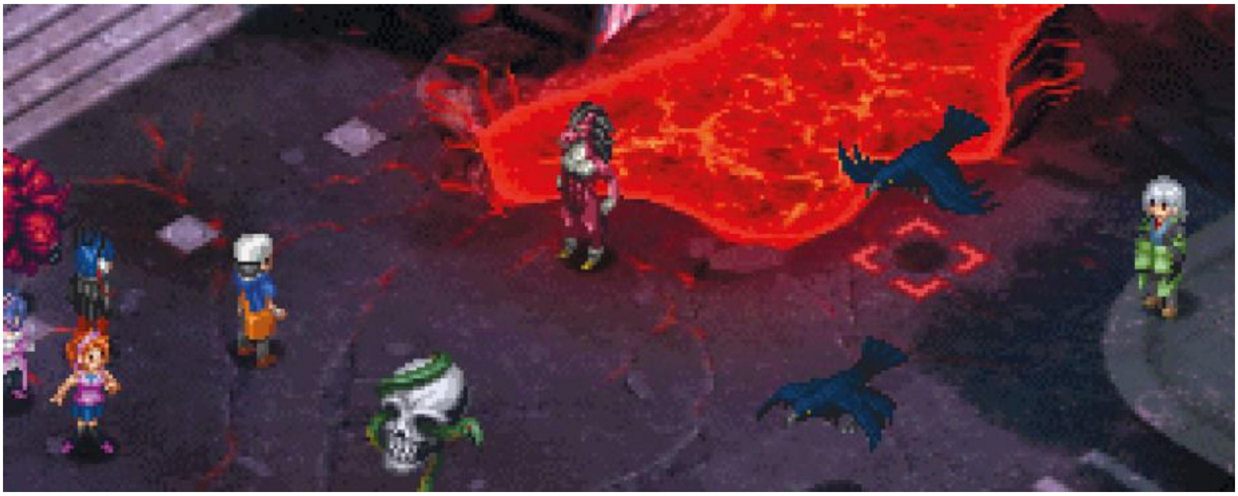
Majin Tensei II: Spiral Nemesis came just over a year later, with an eye-catching isometric map, a large cast of characters, and a complex branching story. Unfortunately, the battle transitions took a bit of a hit; the two units involved in a skirmish are now shown in split screen, and though the bestiary is wider, the sprites are far smaller and less dazzling. Serving as both prequel and sequel, *Spiral Nemesis* opens in Tokyo 1996 with a demonic coup d'état led by a summoner named Ogiwara. Standing in opposition is Partisan, a rag-tag resistance group of which the protagonist, Takeuchi, is a member. Aside from demons, Takeuchi's Partisan comrades make up a good chunk of the playable party. They're all anime archetypes, though a welcome change from the previous game's undefined duo.

Finally there's the infamous *Ronde* for the Saturn. Asuka and his younger brother Satoshi visit Tokyo Museum to see a special exhibition of Aztec art. Tragedy befalls the group when a statue of Moloch springs to life, kidnapping Satoshi to be sacrificed and leaving Asuka to battle an army of demons. Eventually things lead into a plot about ancient computers, and a confrontation with the Zoroastrian devil Angra Mainyu.

Ronde suffers from substantial issues, including a troublesome camera and jerky scrolling. The battle transitions this time are a laughable mess of pre-rendered sprites and FMV, and take ages to load. The game itself isn't inherently awful; it has the same bones as *Spiral Nemesis*, but its poor presentation and technical issues have cemented *Ronde* as a kusoge footnote.

Given the release of the critically acclaimed *Devil Survivor* duo, it's easy to see why *Majin Tensei* hasn't been revisited. However, despite its comparative simplicity, revisiting *Majin Tensei* (*Ronde* aside) is a valuable look back at *SMT*'s darker past.

While Nintendo hyped up a *Shin Megami Tensei* and *Fire Emblem* crossover in 2013, they already had the same basic concept in play with *Majin Tensei*.

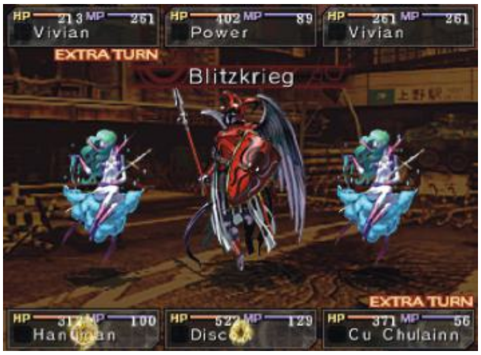


Devil Survivor (series)

Developer: Atlus/Career Soft | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): DS, 3DS

The *Shin Megami Tensei* series had flirted with SRPG mechanics in its *Majin Tensei* spinoff series for the Super Famicom (and the dreadful *Ronde* for the Saturn), and returned to the concept with the *Devil Survivor* series. Mechanically, the *Devil Survivor* games are almost the same, though with a separate story. The first is almost like a retelling of the original *Shin Megami Tensei*, focusing on a group of citizens trapped within Tokyo as it's invaded by demons. The second draws heavy inspiration from the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and has the world ravaged by seemingly invincible beings from outer space, called Septentriones. This story escapes the confines of Tokyo, featuring locations and characters from other major cities in Japan. In both games, the heroes obtain the ability to predict the deaths of other people, who can be saved if the heroes intervene in time. The games were helmed by Career Soft, developers of the *Growlanser* series.

The core gameplay is much like that in *Final Fantasy Tactics*, using the same isometric perspective. Each unit is comprised of a human summoner and one or two demon companions. When you attack, the screen changes to a first-person view and all combatants exchange blows; if a weakness is exploited, then the character responsible may get an extra attack, and if a human leader is struck down, their whole unit is defeated. Collecting and breeding demons, and combining them with human characters, allows for quite a bit of flexibility, and provides huge amounts of depth. Curiously, demons are not recruited via conversation but rather through internet auctions, a novel addition for the modern age. Overall, it's a formula that works extremely well, the only downsides being the presence of escort missions, in which you need to protect friendly, AI-controlled characters, and boss battles that are often way too frustrating.



In the course of the stories, the surviving characters each have their own method of dealing with the impending apocalypse. Depending on your choice of allies, the final chapters branch in different directions, leading to several endings. Alas, like many other modern *SMT* properties, it can't help but feel like it's tailored for teenagers. The character artwork by Suzuhito Yasuda is decent, but the female characters have gigantic, gravity-defying breasts that look absurd. The writing, too, lacks maturity, veering into dumb humour or inappropriate character types. For example, in the first game, gloomy indie rocker Haru totally fits, but chipper cosplay model Midori feels wildly out of place. When it's not weighed down by these aspects, the atmosphere still feels like classic *Megaten*, particularly with the battle sprites, as well as the rocking soundtracks – the second game has music by Kenji Ito (*SaGa*).

Still, the *Devil Survivor* games are high-quality SRPGs. While both entries originated on the DS, both also received 3DS ports. These have full voice acting and some quality-of-life tweaks, plus extra scenarios.

Devil Survivor
NINTENDO DS

***Devil Survivor* has the same inconsistent tone found in many modern *Shin Megami Tensei* games, and the boss battles can be hugely frustrating, but otherwise, it includes some of the finest SRPGs around.**

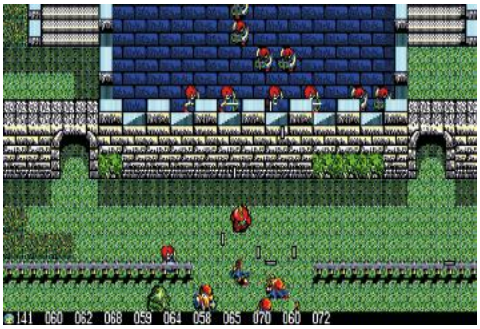
Silver Ghost

Developer: Kure Software Koubou | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): PC88

In *Silver Ghost*, you control young prince Lancelot, who must take back his castle from magician Lucius. At the outset, this appears to be a typical action RPG, à la *Ys*, in which you walk around towns and fields, and can ram into enemies (or use projectiles like magic and arrows) to attack them. But the main gimmick is the "gocha-kyara" ("multi-character") system, which gives you dozens upon dozens of friendly units that Lancelot will draft into his force. While the player only ever directly controls Lancelot, all of his companions will follow him automatically, and engage in combat with foes – there are many classes, and they gain strength the more they fight. As such, it's a sort of real-time strategy RPG, even though there's little actual strategy beyond monitoring the status of your army, switching formations, and knowing when to charge or retreat. It's also the spiritual successor to 1983's *Bokosuka Wars*, in which you control a single character who leads a sizeable army across a large battlefield, though that game also wasn't really an RPG.

Since the graphic capabilities of Japanese PCs were limited, the sprite movement is chaotic, and it's hard to tell what's going on through the choppy animation, though watching hordes of your soldiers slaughter foes is still rewarding.

Hiroyuki Takahashi, one of the creators of the *Shining Force* series, pointed to *Silver Ghost* as one of its main inspirations. From a gameplay perspective, they're totally different, since *Shining Force* is a turn-based tactical strategy game, whereas this one's all chaotic action, but he was inspired by the way all of the many characters appeared on the field.



***Silver Ghost* also paved the way for many other games from publisher Kure Software Koubou, including its *First Queen* series.**

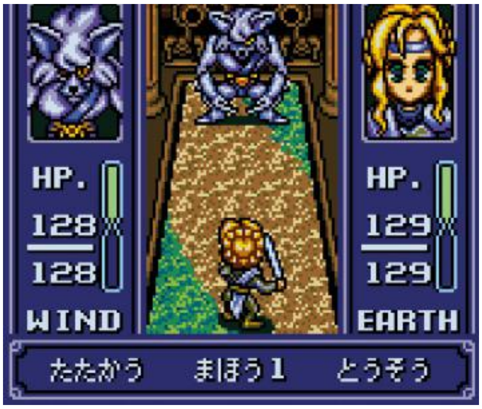
Crystal Warriors / Royal Stone

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): GG

Crystal Warriors is an SRPG for the Game Gear, similar to SEGA's *Shining Force* series, though it predates the first Genesis entry in that series by a few months. It stars Princess Iris of Arliel, who must reclaim her kingdom's stolen elemental crystals from the Emperor Grym. It also has cutesy shoujo-esque character designs by artist Kugatsuhime.

It plays similarly to *Shining Force*, with a few key differences. The type of enemy is unknown – they appear as blank slates with question marks – until you either fight them or cast Scan on them. When combat is initiated, you're switched to a side-view battle scene with a menu, and you trade blows for two turns before returning to the field. The difficulty is high, since characters that are killed are gone forever. Plus, you cannot replay previous missions, so you cannot grind for experience, either. You can, however, tame monsters and have them briefly fight in your place. There is a single town you can explore between battles to buy stuff and get information. Altogether, an excellent game for its time, and noteworthy for actually being released in English.

A successor named *Royal Stone: Hirakareshi Toki no Tobira* ("The Door When Opened") was released in 1995. The plot is not related, and this time concerns Eva, a former knight exiled from her kingdom. It plays like the first one, though the story is more elaborate, featuring numerous cutscenes between fights, and the visuals are stronger, as the fights now use an over-the-shoulder perspective.



GAME GEAR
Royal Stone

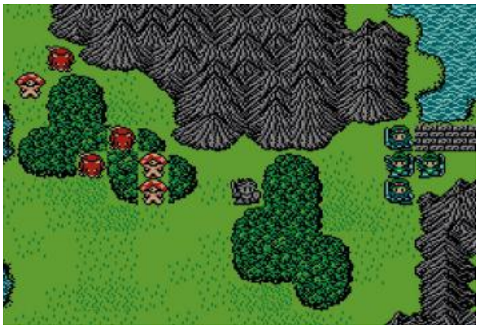
***Royal Stone*, the sequel to *Crystal Warriors*, regrettably never left Japan.**

Just Breed

Developer: Random House | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): FC

Just Breed begins in the town of Astholm, where the hero is about to watch his girlfriend Firis ascend to the rank of priestess. Right after the ceremony, she is kidnapped, leaving behind only the sapphire that protects their kingdom. So the hero sets off to both rescue her and save the kingdom. The game was developed by Random House, with art by Yuzo Takada (*3×3 Eyes*, *Blue Seed*), and is the largest RPG on the Famicom, clocking in at six megabits.

Just Breed is very similar to *Shining Force*, in that you can explore towns and talk to people freely, but whenever you enter the overworld or any combat-focused scenario, you're switched over to a turn-based tactical battle system. (The game was released after SEGA's, but had been in development for three years, so its similarity is likely coincidental.) It plays similarly to others of the time, but there are no separate combat animations, so the pacing is much quicker. You can have up to 24 units in combat, broken up into separate armies comprising of five soldiers and one commander. Subordinates cannot move too far from their commander, but all of them share experience regardless of who actually kills the monsters.



The story is pretty decent, and there are elements that differ from the JRPG tropes of the time – for example, fellow units walk around town of their own accord, instead of just following the hero. Unfortunately, it was commercial flop, since it was released very late in the Famicom's life, when it was competing directly with *Final Fantasy IV* and Enix's own *Dragon Quest V*, but nonetheless, it's regarded as an overlooked classic.

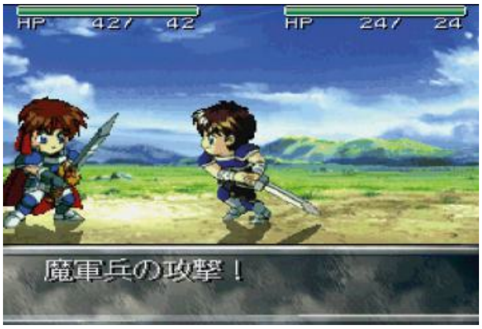
Just Breed **is one of the handful of games to use the fancy MMC5 mapper chip, making it one of the more technically advanced games on the Famicom.**

Farland Story (series)

Developer: Technical Group Lab | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): PC98, PCFX, PS1, SFC, WIN, SAT

The *Farland Story* franchise, from Technical Group Laboratory, Inc., began in 1992 and spans numerous entries. They are fairly typical SRPGs, in the vein of *Fire Emblem*, but the cutesy visual style and lower level of difficulty give them a wider appeal than just the usual fanbase. They take place on the island of Edochi, which contains three warring nations vying for supremacy. Outside of the first handful of games, the protagonists are different, though they all take place in the same game world.

There are eight core games in the *Farland Story* series, so far as the early PC games are concerned. *Farland Story FX* (a.k.a. *Yottsu no Fuuin*) is a compilation for PC-FX, PlayStation and Windows of the first two games, while *Farland Story 2: Dance of Destruction* is a direct sequel to this release. The second Super Famicom entry is not a port but rather a new, separate game, and the Saturn entry is a sequel to these. The PlayStation game in particular is interesting for its dramatic scaling and rotation effects on the map, and for its large, super-deformed sprites. Certain entries, like the two *Farland Saga* games, as well as *Farland Symphony*, change the perspective from overhead to isometric, and the two *Farland Odyssey* games are slightly more traditional JRPGs incorporating random dungeon crawling. The console CD-ROM versions also include voice acting.

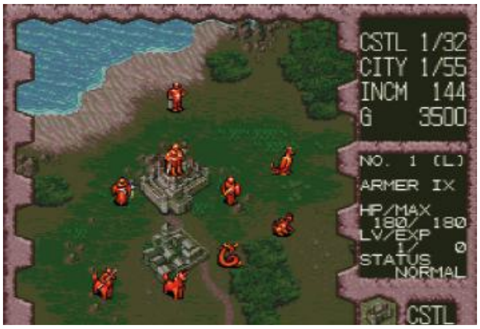


Ultimately, all of the *Farland Story* games are fairly derivative in both storytelling and gameplay, though they did find some success in China and Korea, and most of them have been fan-translated into English.

The *Farland Story* games were never stellar, but they sure were prolific.

Dark Wizard

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SCD



DARK WIZARD
SEGA CD
SEGA

Unlike typical SEGA CD games of this era, *Dark Wizard* moves away from the heavy use of limited-gameplay cinematics to provide players with an interactive, addictive strategy game that not only outshines many other games on the console, but holds its own against strategy games on other early '90s systems. The game begins by allowing players to choose one of four commanders to liberate the kingdom of Cheshire from the dark wizard Velonese. Two of the commanders, Prince Armer and Robin, are aligned with "good", whilst the other two, Krystal and Amon, are "chaos"-slanted. The character selection not only allows players to choose which branching storyline and ending to engage, but also affects the gameplay by offering different army units, sub-characters, spell sets, equipment, and promotions, providing a high degree of replayability.

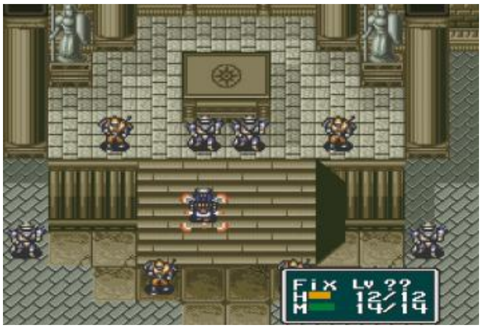
Dark Wizard tells its story through the voiced cutscenes. These are bland compared to those in other RPGs, but the gameplay is where the game truly shines. Battles take place on a huge hexagon-tiled map, covered with forests, mountains, deserts, and bodies of water, all of which affect the movement of troops. There are also villages, which can be entered to gather information or buy equipment. Some areas of the map contain hidden weapons, towns, and even characters.

Compared with many other lacklustre games in the SEGA CD library, *Dark Wizard* stands a cut above, and offers fans of the strategy or role-playing genre a much needed option for the system. SEGA carried on this strategy RPG formula, and released the highly-acclaimed *Dragon Force* for the SEGA Saturn in 1996.

It's nothing fancy, but *Dark Wizard* makes a nice accompaniment to *Shining Force CD*.

Feda (series)

Developer: Max Entertainment | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SFC, SAT, PS1



Feda: The Emblem of Justice focuses on the oppressive Balformian Empire, and two warriors who fight against it. It is also, plainly, a *Shining Force* rip-off, originally created for the Super Famicom. It looks and plays almost identically, right down to the ability to explore towns between missions and the cinematic conflict cut-ins. It even features art by the same illustrator, Yoshitaka Tamaki, who fills the roster with plenty of human and anthropomorphic beast characters. It's somewhat darker though, lacking the storybook feel of SEGA's series. Where it differs even more is in its alignment system – each mission has set goals, and it's up to you to either follow or defy them. At the end of each mission, you are ranked, and depending on your actions, you can go down different route alignments for law, neutral and chaos, with various characters either joining or leaving your cause. The game later received a remake on the Saturn, suitably named *Feda Remake!*, which enhances the graphics and makes a few small tweaks and additions.

The PlayStation sequel, *Feda 2: White Surge the Platoon*, tries to set itself apart by ditching many of its predecessor's elements to make it less *Shining Force*-like, but it also removes the branching paths. You can still choose to follow or defy orders though, and this time it will alter the flow of the mission. You're still ranked on how well you performed, affecting which characters can join you, as well as the rewards after each mission.

Quality-wise, they're decent, though they don't stand out much; there are better games. The live-action intro to *Feda 2* is amusing, if nothing else.

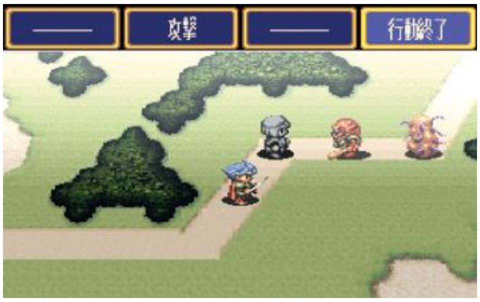
It's *Shining Force* for the Super Famicom, pretty much!

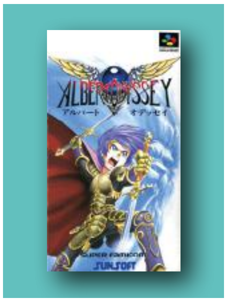
Albert Odyssey (series)

Developer: Sunsoft | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SFC, SAT

Sunsoft wasn't exactly known for RPGs – its first dabble was the unremarkable 1989 PC Engine game *Benkei Gaiden*, then it went on to produce the *Albert Odyssey* series. In the first game, you play as a warrior named Albert, who must fend off the attacks of the dark magician Globus.

Albert Odyssey is similar to *Shining Force* in that it meshes together a standard RPG and an SRPG. However, it's more open-ended, and it's not divided into missions; the game simply functions in turn-based fashion whenever you're exploring the overworld, dungeons, or anywhere else with enemies. Also, rather unusually, the areas are divided into hexes rather than squares, though otherwise it's pretty typical of the formula. Battle scenes consist of the super-deformed characters exchanging blows, making it a little more comical than *Fire Emblem*. The big technical draw is the Mode 7 implementation, similar to the *Final Fantasy VI* overworld, though every time a character turns, the entire screen rotates with them, a cool, albeit disorienting, effect. The music, by Naoki Kodaka, also known for many NES titles like *Journey to Silius* and *Blaster Master*, is a highlight.





The story in the first *Albert Odyssey* game is pretty standard, but it ends on a rather downbeat cliffhanger, which isn't entirely resolved in the sequel, *Jashin no Taidou* ("Sign of the Devil"). This game picks up ten years down the road, and stars a character named Dean, who wishes to follow in the footsteps of his hero, Albert. The series continued on the Saturn as a spinoff called *Albert Odyssey Gaiden*, which changed the format to a more typical JRPG. This game was localised by Working Designs under the name *Albert Odyssey: Legend of Eldean.*

This series of SRPGs paved the way for the later Saturn game, which is a traditional JRPG.

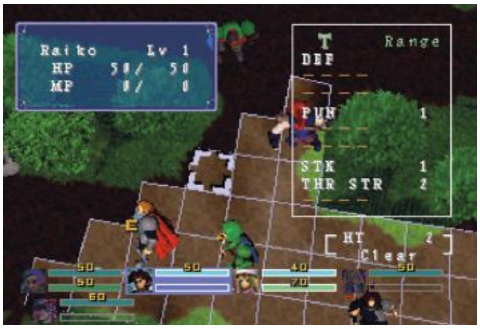
Mystaria: The Realms of Lore

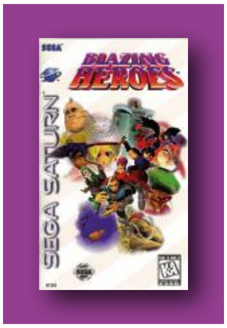
Developer: SEGA/Micro Cabin | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SAT

Mystaria is a series of strategy RPGs released on the SEGA Saturn. The first game was released in Europe as *Mystaria: The Realms of Lore* in 1995 and again in America as *Blazing Heroes* in 1996. It followed *Virtual Hydlide*, making it the second RPG for the Saturn in America, and was one of the first 3D fifth-generation RPGs. The developer, Micro Cabin, is known for offbeat Japanese PC RPGs such as *Illusion City* and the *Xak* series. The 1996 sequel, *Riglord Saga 2*, was only released in Japan.

The player assumes the role of Aragon, prince of the conquered kingdom of Queensland, who must assemble the 12 warriors fated to challenge Lord Bane and save Queensland. The story is simple, and even though some of the characters look colourful, they don't have much personality.

The game is a little simple. Battles play out in a familiar chess-like fashion, but there's little character development. The game utilises an interesting skill system that unlocks techniques as you use different skills with characters, but there's no growth diversity. Since there are no strategic considerations in any level's terrain or victory condition, every battle is just a dash to slay every enemy using the most powerful skill available. The game feels sluggish and primitive even when compared to its contemporaries.



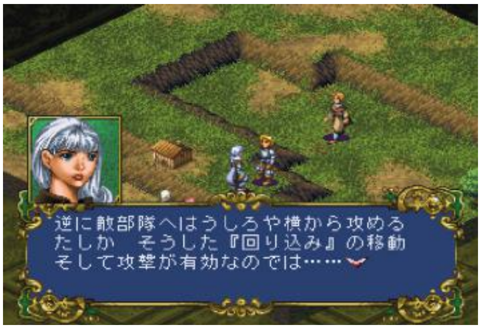


SEGA's never been known for its console RPG library. Few titles ever made a splash, outside of the *Shining Force* and *Phantasy Star* games. *Mystaria* feels like Saturn's *Quest 64*: a shallow showcase of the system's 3D abilities that represents a bone thrown to hungry gamers, who would need to wait three more long years before they could play *Shining Force III.*

"Mystara" is a location in *Dungeons & Dragons*, so the American name for this game was probably altered for being a little too close.

Terra Phantastica

Developer: Chime | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SAT



逆に敵部隊へはうしろや横から攻める
たしか　そうした『回り込み』の移動
そして攻撃が有効なのでは……

SEGA SATURN
Terra Phantastica
SEGA

Prince Alexis is the leader of the Grand Duchy of Mais, which has suffered under the attacks of the demonic nation of Bowfon. Coming to his aid is a mysterious woman named Deene, whose visage resembles the statue of a goddess, though she seems to have no memory. Together, they will fight back and protect their kingdom.

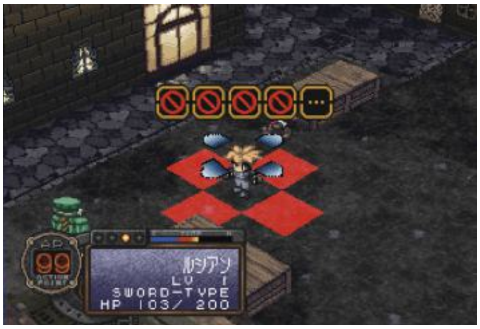
Terra Phantastica borrows the medieval fantasy setting of most tactical RPGs, here with character artwork by Akihiro Yamada, as well as utilising an isometric perspective, à la *Tactics Ogre*. Each unit is assigned a squadron of troops, which can be commanded in different formations, determining their abilities. Positioning is always important in SRPGs, but there's an even greater emphasis on it in this game, since you can flank enemies, putting them at a disadvantage. Defeated enemies can retreat, so you can force them into situations where you can wipe them out more easily. When conflict occurs, the game zooms in to a closer viewpoint, from which you can pick commands and exchange blows for a few turns. Characters may be able to act multiple times in a turn if they have enough AP, though you also need to monitor their Elan (stamina) so they don't get too worn out. Only one character has healing magic, so to efficiently replenish your units, you need to claim glowing areas on the field to regenerate yourself, adding to the strategy. Additionally, Deene needs to offer lessons to Alexis during the game, and how well she teaches him determines the ending.

While not as flashy as *Dragon Force*, released around the same time, the emphasis on troop types and formations makes them feel similar. The battles tend to drag, but otherwise it's a decent game.

Developer Chime worked on *Dragon Force II*, so they did have some people in common.

Wachenröder

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): SAT



SEGA SATURN
WACHENRÖDER
SEGA

Wachenröder is set in the steampunk dystopia of Edward Island, where the rich few live in relative comfort while the poor wallow in pollution. In the slums, there lives a boy named Lucian, grieving and frustrated over the death of his sickly sister, which sends him on a quest for vengeance.

At the core of *Wachenröder*'s tactical battles are mechas called Sledges or Steam Refined Gears. Your move options are dictated by Action Points, and you can perform multiple actions in a turn, plus special attacks are limited by a Heating Gauge, which you need to observe so you don't overheat. The sprites on the field feel too cutesy, while the 3D models used in combat are a little rough, even considering the Saturn's tech.

The battle segments aren't really what makes *Wachenröder* stand out; they are functional if not particularly involving. The emphasis is really on the world design. This was produced by a number of prominent writers and artists, including Yoshitoshi Abe (*Serial Experiments Lain*) and Range Murata (*Last Exile*). The in-game visuals have a dinginess one would expect in a world suffocated by contamination, while the sepia-toned artwork gives them a distinctive retro-futuristic style. The scale models used in the cutscenes prove more impressive than the CG animation typical of the era. The soundtrack, which includes contributions by Ian McDonald of the prog rock band King Crimson, is excellent as well.

Released near the end of the Saturn's life, the game wasn't particularly popular – perhaps it was a little too dark and depressing, and SRPG fans identified it as being too easy – but appreciated as a work of art, it's certainly an overlooked classic.

***Wachenröder* is so committed to its aesthetic that its packaging even includes a whole separate art book.**

Brigandine

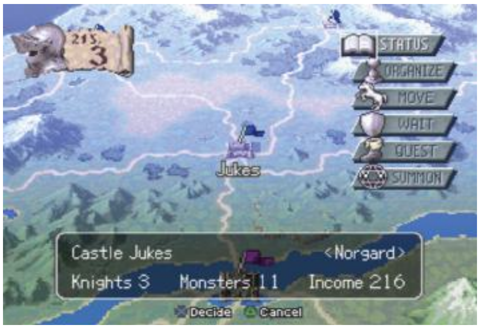
Developer: Hearty Robin | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1, NSW

In the land of Forsena, peace was within the grasp of the king of Almekia, until he was betrayed by one of his mightiest generals. Taking control of one of six nations, the player must conquer the entire continent to bring peace to the world once more.

A war simulation SRPG, it was extraordinarily ambitious, letting you summon monsters, manage characters, and attack castles. Battles are conducted as attackers versus defenders, with at most three leaders on each side. In essence, the game is a grand fantasy of mighty warriors, spellcasters, and powerful creatures both mundane and magical, fighting in large scale battles. However, the game may have been too ambitious for its time, as the war simulation and SRPG aspects come into conflict at many points. Yet there was almost no other game that even attempted to blend these two aspects together.

Unlike Koei's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* series, and other war simulations, there is more of an emphasis on characterisation and plot development. In contrast to SRPGs such as *Final Fantasy Tactics*, there's less of a push to funnel experience into characters, as many are already strong. Although this enables strong characters to have a major presence, other, less developed characters can be pushed to the sidelines all the more.

In the year 2000, the developers Hearty Robin released a new version called *Brigandine: Grand Edition* that allows multiplayer action, has you taking control of the Esgares Empire by default, and made major refinements to the overall game. The series was resurrected in 2020 with a new sequel, called *Brigandine: The Legend of Runersia.*



Castle Jukes <Norgard>
Knights 3 Monsters 11 Income 216
Decide Cancel

PlayStation
BRIGANDINE
The Legend of Forsena

Even now, in a world of plentiful SRPG releases, *Brigandine's* approach to the genre is unique.

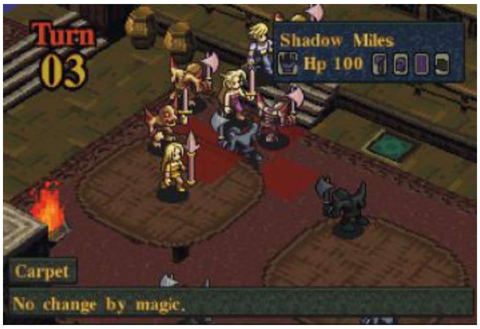
Kartia

Developer: Atlus | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1

Atlus' *Kartia* takes place in the land of Rebus, and you can choose to view the story as one of two characters caught in a great war – a young knight named Toxa or a shrine warrior named Lacryma. Their stories are completely different and each has 18 levels, so you need to play the game twice to experience everything.

The combat in *Kartia* is pretty similar to that in *Tactics Ogre* or *Final Fantasy Tactics*. The central elements are the titular Kartia, which are enchanted cards with words on them. You can also combine these cards for various effects. They can be used to chant magic spells, but more importantly, they can also be used to create Phantoms, creatures that act as friendly units, which come in three different classes that interact in a rock-paper-scissors fashion. They're generally weaker than human characters, but conversely, they're disposable, whereas any human deaths mean you lose the whole mission. There's also a system whereby you can craft your own equipment using Kartia. Magic can also have an effect on the terrain, though this aspect is under-utilised.

Produced by key *Megami Tensei* developer Kouji Okada, this crafting system is the heart of the game. The core strategy action isn't much different from that in similar titles but it's well put together and there's enough flexibility to the Phantom and spell systems to make up for its linearity (there aren't any shops or side missions apart from some battles in the Arena). The character artwork by Yoshitaka Amano is distinctive, though otherwise the visuals are fairly average. Altogether, this game seems largely forgotten but is fairly decent.



Carpet
No change by magic.

PlayStation
KARTIA
ATLUS

While Atlus published the *Growlanser* games, their key staff tried their hands at a few SRPGs, *Kartia* being the first.

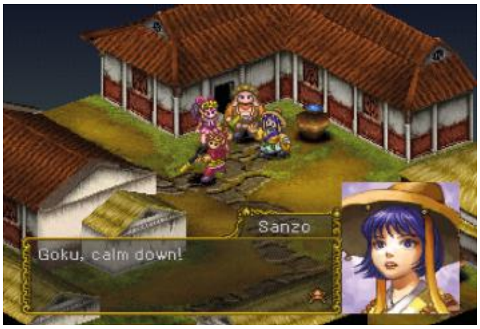
Saiyuki: Journey West

Developer: Fu-Qi | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1

Known as *Saiyuuki* in Japan, the 16th century classical Chinese novel *Xī Yóu Jì* has had many pop culture adaptations, from Nippon TV's live action *Monkey* to *Dragon Ball*. Legendarily awful game *Super Monkey Daibouken* demonstrated how not to adapt it for interactive media; fortunately, *Saiyuki: Journey West* is a much better attempt.

Saiyuki is a simplified retelling of the Buddhist monk Sanzo's pilgrimage from China to India on divine instruction from Bodhisattva Kannon. Though expressly male in the source material, the player can choose a male or female Sanzo. Accompanying them are Goku, the monkey king; Hakkai, the pig chef; Gojo, the river lord; Ryorin, the dragon princess; and Kikka, the dryad; the first three are from the novel, while the latter two are original characters. There's also a handful of optional characters who can be gained through side quests.

In this small-scale tactical RPG, Sanzo and co. right wrongs and fight bandits and demons on their way to India. Each of the companions has the ability to transform into a giant Were form, boosting their stats and granting additional powerful attacks. Only one character can transform at a time, and each action costs Were Points. Once all Were Points are depleted, the transformation ends. Unable to transform, Sanzo is initially the most fragile, functioning as the party's primary healer. As the story progresses, however, helpful spirits start to offer their assistance. These can be summoned by Sanzo three times each, offering buffs as well as bestowing a suite of powerful spells. Altogether, a worthwhile entry in the strategy-RPG genre.


Sanzo

Goku, calm down!

PlayStation
SAIYUKI
Journey West
KOEI

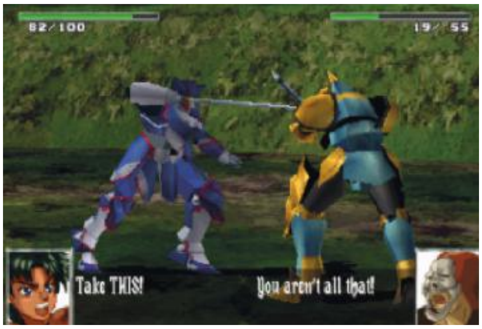
The *Saiyuki* tale isn't particularly well known among Westerners; although some will recognise it from various adaptations, such as this one.

Vanguard Bandits

Developer: Human Entertainment | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1

Near the end of Working Designs' PS1 catalogue is *Vanguard Bandits*, known as *Epica Stella* in Japan. Seemingly influenced by *The Vision of Escaflowne*, it takes place on the fantasy continent of Eptina, where several nations battle using giant mechas called All Terrain Armoured Combatants (ATACs for short). A young nomad named Bastion travels with his father Kamorge, seeking to beat back the Junaris Empire and give the oppressed Pharastia Kingdom a chance at peace. Soon Bastion learns he's the exiled heir to the throne, but after witnessing Pharastia's own war crimes, he finds himself at an existential crossroads.

In contrast to the customisable mechas of *Front Mission*, *Vanguard Bandits'* ATACs really only differ in appearance. Rather than swapping parts to tune performance, the player simply changes out equipment, as in any number of tactical RPGs. When a unit gains a level, it's granted three skill points to be divided between a handful of stats; hitting certain thresholds unlocks new battle skills and passive effects. This allows an individual unit to prioritise its own expertise, though the decision is a permanent one.



Take THIS!

You aren't all that!

The game's true appeal lies in its multiple paths, reminiscent of *Langrisser*. Bastion can choose whether to stay the course and face his destiny, join the Imperial Princess' reformist squadron, or go for power-mad conquest. Each of these routes has multiple endings, dependent on Bastion's relationships with his comrades, which change by during interactions between battles.

Notably, the very bouncy soundtrack was by Chiyomaru Shikura, creator of the *Science Adventure* series (*Steins;Gate*).

PlayStation
VANGUARD BANDITS

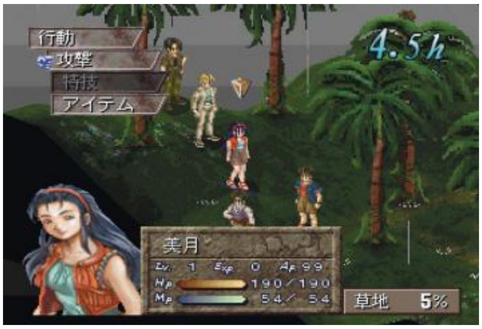
The English version of the song "Tomorrow to Start" was sung by Shiya Almeda, who also worked with Working Designs on the opening track on *Lunar: The Silver Star* for the SEGA CD.

Ningyo no Rakuin

Developer: Highwaystar | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS1

The heroes of *Ningyo no Rakuin* ("Mark of the Mermaid") are mostly a group of high school students that crash-land on an uncharted island. The students survive mostly unscathed, only to be accosted by crazed people, who kidnap the heroine, Mizuki. They are able to save her, but she has been branded with the titular mark, which will turn her into a mermaid. The story draws heavily on the Cthulhu Mythos, with the island inhabitants worshipping some dark god, and many characters are strange hybrids of humans and insects or plants. Even parts of the landscape, like the trees, can be hostile. So "mermaid" here doesn't mean the Disney type, but rather, the terrifying body horror type.

The game plays pretty much like a standard PS1 SRPG, and allows you to take five of the eight characters into encounters. Each of them has set skills, which grows over the course of the game. The story is completely linear, so items need to be found on the field, and it's easy to miss important equipment or fail to level a character up sufficiently. The interface is also something of a pain, as the camera makes it hard to see around the terrain, especially considering that once you commit to a move, you can't reverse the command if it turns out to be a mistake.



Ningyo no Rakuin is one of the few Japanese SRPGs to be influenced by H.P. Lovecraft, and this, along with the illustrated stills, makes it feel very distinct from other SRPGs.

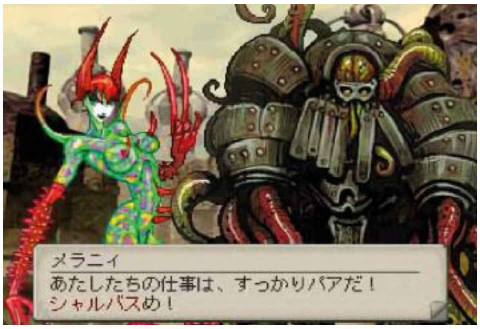
Conversely, the structure makes it relatively easy to play with minimal Japanese skills. The story really is the focus here, and the cutscenes do a fantastic job of telling the story. There's even some plot branching based on how the hero, Keisuke, handles his newly mutated girlfriend. While Lovecraft-inspired games aren't exactly uncommon, there really aren't any other SRPGs of this type, and it's a welcome entry.

Volfoss

Developer: Namco | Released: 2001 | Platform(s): PS1

In Namco's *Volfoss,* you are in charge of a mercenary army called the Silver Gang. In Volfoss World, there are three nations that you can choose to run missions for – Ikuiape, a land filled with rusting metal; Asdenia, filled with swamps and forests; and the unusual Caldea land, which is like a deranged child's huge bedroom. By running missions, both increase the rank of Silver Fang and affect the allegiances between the kingdoms, which eventually branch off into different endings.

The tactical battle system is similar to that in other SRPGs, though both the landscapes and the units are rendered in 3D. You can also capture and recruit numerous soldiers from any of the three kingdoms, and herein lies the game's main draw. The creature design was provided by Yasushi Nirasawa, an artist known for his monster illustrations in various *Kamen Rider* series. The artwork here is absolutely insane – there's a flaming heart wrapped in barbed wire, a skeleton with chicken legs that rides on a billiard ball, a spiked woman wearing an iron maiden as armour, a psychedelic punk rock centaur, a headless roast turkey who wields a knife and a fork, a sexy nurse who attacks with a syringe, a gigantic pierced ear, and all manner of other creatures that walk the line between gross and fetishistic.



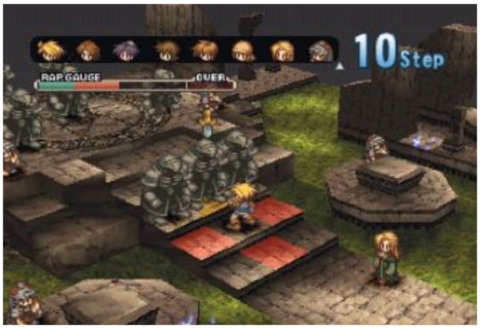
メラニィ
あたしたちの仕事は、すっかりパアだ！
シャルバスめ！

The wild-as-heck designs of *Volfoss* are a huge part of the game's appeal.

Combining all this with a heavy metal soundtrack, *Volfoss* really tries to ride that punk rock attitude as far as it can, because the core game is pretty rough. The difficulty level is fairly high, and if you don't choose your missions carefully, you can get railroaded into a bad ending. Add in a clumsy interface, and it becomes a frustrating, if fascinating, experience.

Hoshigami

Developer: MaxFive | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1, DS



PlayStation
HOSHIGAMI
ATLUS

On the continent of Mardias, the countries of Nightweld, Gerauld, and the Valaimian Empire stand in uneasy alliance following a long-fought war against the spirits of nature. Before long, the Empire launches a surprise assault on Gerauld, conquering it in part before setting its sights on Nightweld. The unfortunately named Fazz, along with his friend/mentor Leimrey, find themselves enlisted to help drive back the Empire's forces. What follows is a battle for supremacy that will leave their friendship as a casualty.

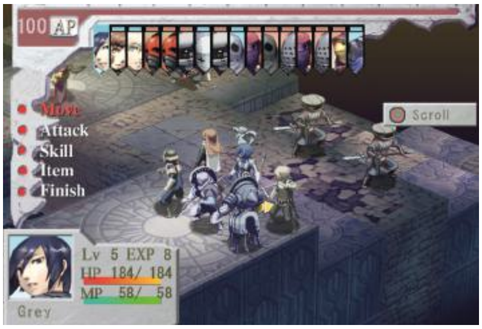
Hoshigami, at first sight an attractive successor to *Final Fantasy Tactics,* has the dubious reputation of being one of the most aggravating strategy RPGs ever produced. And with good reason – though not particularly difficult, its design challenges the player's good faith at every turn. Experience points are hard to come by, requiring each of your units to land the killing blow on several adversaries to level up. Spellcasters have it even worse, especially early on, when characters are only able to cast once in every 20 turns, leaving them useless for the majority of a battle. Outside of static turns, any action costs Ready-for-Action-Points (RAP). In theory this allows actions to be finely tailored, but in practice a character will move three squares and not have enough RAP to attack. Most frustrating of all, it takes no fewer than seven button presses to confirm you wish to end a character's turn.

Hoshigami Remix, released in 2007 for the Nintendo DS, added a difficulty select and multiple endings, but as the bones of the game remained unchanged, it met with a similarly poor reception.

***Hoshigami* is one of the most famously disliked SRPGs out there, so it's baffling that they not only ported it but did little to actually fix it.**

Stella Deus

Developer: Pinegrow/Atlus | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): PS2



PlayStation 2
STELLA DEUS
ATLUS

At some point in the early 2000s, the core team behind *Hoshigami* left obscure studio MaxFive for the even more enigmatic Pinegrow. Their first game together, *Stella Deus,* is clearly a spiritual sequel to the maligned strategy RPG. Cleverly, this is revealed by the game's title: *Hoshigami* and *Stella Deus* both translate to "Star God". Atlus were fully involved this time around, and *Stella Deus* was notably the first game to feature character designs by Shigenori Soejima (*Persona 3-5*).

The continent of Solum has been engulfed by a lethal miasma, resulting in vast desertification. Taking advantage of the looming climate disaster is Overlord Dignas, a brutal dictator promising a solution to those who bow to him. Protagonist Spero finds himself drafted by Dignas to kill Spirits, something that doesn't sit right with him. Upon meeting the shamanic Princess Linea, he finds his eyes opened to the hard truth.

Stella Deus is a vast improvement over *Hoshigami*; the game's system is the same, but the quality-of-life features make for a far less frustrating experience. No longer is the player forced to confirm a single action multiple times, ally units don't die permanently, and the magic system is far less esoteric. Character customisation is handled by Skill Points (SP), which are granted alongside experience for every action taken in combat. SP can be exchanged for a skill, spell, passive ability that a character can naturally acquire, or be taught through skill scrolls.

Stella Deus is truly a redemption story for the *Hoshigami* team. Soejima especially deserves praise for his character designs, and the soundtrack by Basiscape is also a gem.

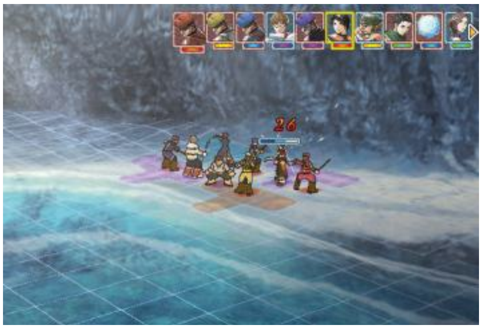
***Stella Deus* is basically the sequel to *Hoshigami,* though they had to change its name to avoid the earlier game's stench.**

Suikoden Tactics

Developer: Konami | Released: 2005 | Platform(s): PS2

One of a handful of *Suikoden* spinoffs of varying genres, *Suikoden Tactics* is both a sequel and prequel to *Suikoden IV*. Penned by *IV*'s writer and series artist Junko Kawano, *Tactics* was titled *Rhapsodia* in Japan, emphasising its identity as an original story. As it wasn't intended to be a main *Suikoden* title, the 108 Stars of Destiny are not present here, although character recruitment is still very robust: roughly 60 characters can be recruited to the cause, many returning from *IV*.

The game opens on the Island Nations, several years before the Kooluk Empire conflict, when an engineer named Walter, his crew, and his son Kyril seek to destroy Rune cannons – heinous biological weapons capable of transforming people into Lovecraftian melds of man and fish. When Walter ends up on the receiving end of a cannon blast, his companions Andarc, Seneca, and Yohn help a traumatised Kyril escape. Time then skips past the end of *Suikoden IV*, with Kyril beginning his father's mission anew.



What sets *Tactics* apart from its peers is its emphasis on elements. Elemental runes can be used to imbue tiles with the matching energy. Each character has an innate element; when they stand on a tile of their own element, they receive an offensive/defensive boost and regenerate HP; when they stand on an opposing element, they take a debuff and lose HP. The same is true for enemies, so the key to battle is often to set up an elemental base and play defensively. This unusual feature makes for one of the most challenging strategy games of its era. Its reception was rather chilly though, particularly as it was related to one of the most unpopular games in the series.

PlayStation.2
Suikoden Tactics
KONAMI

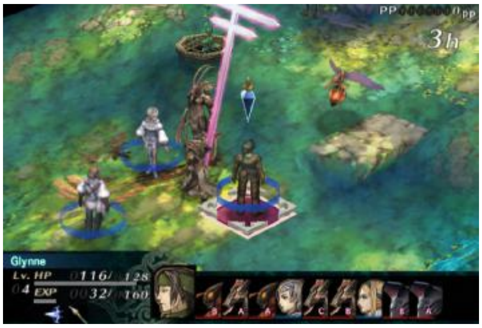
In addition to this SRPG spinoff, Konami created a few *Suikogaiden* visuals novels, as well as *Gensou Suikoden Card Stories* for the Game Boy Advance.

Eternal Poison

Developer: Flight-Plan | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): PS2

Eternal Poison (known as *Poison Pink* in Japan) was the first of Flight-Plan's SRPGs to actually see an overseas release, courtesy of Atlus. However, it didn't really put its right foot forward with this one. It takes place in the Kingdom of Valdia; demons have invaded and kidnapped the princess, and it's up to five different squads to venture to Besek to save her. Each squad has its own scenario, and you choose between them at the outset; certain actions are required to reach the true ending.

The key to this game is capturing beasts, called Majin, which is accomplished by "overkilling" them. You can sell them or take their skills to use as your own, but you can also extract Poison Points to buy Majin to use in combat. However, since they don't grow in experience, there's not a whole lot of use for this.



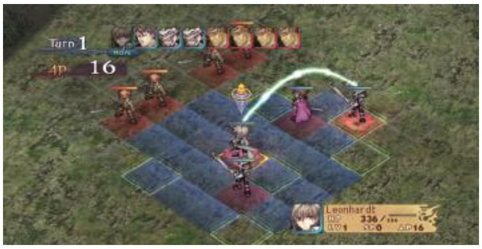
The artwork is *Eternal Poison*'s strongest point, provided by fantasy artist Tomatika. Tage, the game's central character, has a striking gothic-Lolita fashion sense, and the rest of the game's fairly large cast is also striking; the Majin designs are fantastic as well, provided by famous illustrators like Yasushi Nirasawa and Kenji Ando, both known for *Kamen Rider*. However, little of this is reflected in the game itself. The computer-generated FMV just can't render these illustrations properly, and they look really poor. And while other PS2 Flight-Plan games used detailed spritework, *Eternal Poison* uses 3D models, which cannot compare. It also features *Fire Emblem*-style combat animations, but these, too, just don't look all that good, and feel like a waste of time. What's left is just a mediocre experience.

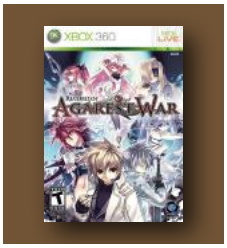
PlayStation.2
Eternal Poison
ATLUS

Beautiful character artwork and a monster-capturing system can't save this otherwise rote SRPG.

Record of Agarest War (series)

Developer: Idea Factory/Compile Heart/Red | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): X360, PS3, WIN, PSP





The limited edition of the Xbox 360 version included a breast-shaped mousepad, which indicates the kind of audience the publisher was targeting.

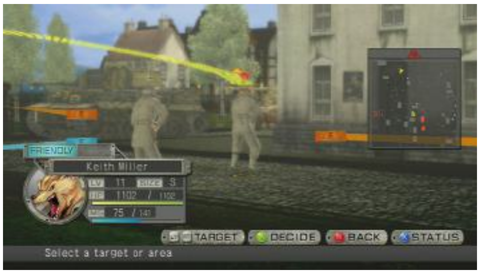
Idea Factory started in 1996 and was known for low budget Japan-only RPGs like *Spectral Force*. It got its first chance at international distribution with PSP games like *Spectral Souls* and *Generations of Chaos*. It was also responsible for games like *Chaos Wars*, *Trinity Universe*, and *Cross Edge*, which include crossovers with *Disgaea*, *Atelier*, *Shadow Hearts*, *Growlanser*, and *Darkstalkers*. Many of these titles are substandard strategy RPGs that cloak their low-budget visuals and poor gameplay with some kind of novelty. Idea Factory later established Compile Heart, which worked hard and quickly to pander to the otaku demographic. Before it settled into a role with its *Neptunia* games, it created a number of games in the *Agarest War* series.

Idea Factory games tend to cobble together concepts from better titles. *Record of Agarest War* draws from games like *Phantasy Star III* and *Fire Emblem: Seisen no Keifu*, in that its story is divided into different generations. At the end of each generation, you pick one of three women to become your wife, which in turn influences the abilities and stats of your son. However, these games play further into the sexiness, with plenty of suggestive artwork. And yet, these scenes are sparse, and anyone hoping for extreme sexiness will be disappointed when most of the game is an ugly SRPG with boring playing fields, awful balance, and a terrible interface.

To be fair, later games at least do something interesting. In the sequel, if you choose a wife with whom you haven't built up a proper relationship, you enter a loveless marriage, and your child's stats suffer. Compile Heart also gave up the SRPG clothing with the fourth entry, *Record of Agarest War Mariage*, which is basically a visual novel, interwoven with traditional turn-based battle scenes.

Operation Darkness

Developer: Success | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): X360



XBOX 360
Operation Darkness
ATLUS

***Operation Darkness* has a huge number of technical issues, and it's ugly as sin, but deal with those, and it's a pretty decent SRPG with an absolutely wild story.**

Operation Darkness is wild. It's occasionally presented as a serious recreation of World War II as a strategy RPG, weaving in numerous historical characters ... except Adolf Hitler and the Nazis are in cahoots with Count Dracula's league of vampires, known as the Blood Clan. You play as part of an Allied team called the Wolf Pack, led by Cordelia Blake, who is also a werewolf. Other characters in your squad include a pyrokinetic young woman, a descendent of the Arthurian knight Lancelot, Jack the Ripper, the granddaughter of vampire slayer Van Helsing, and a resurrected German soldier who wears a supersuit. Also, at some point, you get magic powers along with your machine guns and bazookas, and there are some dragons, zombies, and skeletons in there too.

But playing this game is just so, so difficult. The camera is invariably at squad eye level, requiring that you constantly tilt and manoeuvre it just to get a grip on your surroundings. The maps are huge, and it's hard to tell where any unit is in relation to the rest of the squad. Once you commit to a move, you can't take it back, even if you discover that you can't hit your target. Not only are the fundamentals just not there, but this is an ugly-looking game, with an atrocious frame rate – the camera zooms around to give the action some drama, but it's so choppy that it's more disorienting than dramatic.

Most of the wild fantasy stuff doesn't come into the story until you're a fair way in, when the insanity should have been front and centre. But those who can tolerate its many (many, many) substantial issues will find a work of insanity like few others – even the roughly similar *Valkyria Chronicles*, while a much better game overall, just doesn't compare.

Valkyrie Profile: Covenant of the Plume

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS

A prequel to the events of *Valkyrie Profile*, *Covenant of the Plume* depicts the Æsir–Vanir War from a mortal perspective: protagonist Wylfred's father was slain in battle, and his soul taken by Valkyrie Lenneth to aid Odin's forces, leaving a single feather behind. As repeated tragedy befalls his family, his grudge only burns more strongly, until he's noticed by Hel, the queen of Niflheim. The two enter a pact: the more brutality Wylfred perpetrates, the more power she'll grant him to slay Lenneth, using the Valkyrie's feather as a conduit. Now called the Destiny Plume, Wylfred can invoke it to supercharge an ally at the cost of their life and immortal soul.

Adapting *Valkyrie Profile 2*'s battle system to a strategy RPG isn't actually that much of a stretch, as *Silmeria*'s battle system was a step towards this genre. *Covenant of the Plume* only allows four combatants to join a battle – one for each face button – and tasks the player with positioning them to allow multiple simultaneous attacks. There's a much greater emphasis on Overkill this time around, with the introduction of Sin: Sin is accrued by continuing to combo a foe past death, which charges the Plume.

NINTENDO DS
VALKYRIE PROFILE
Covenant of the Plume
SQUARE ENIX

This encourages the player to plink away at healthy foes, before going all out once they're weak.

Savvy players will recognise that Hel is up to no good, and Wylfred's path through the game is governed by how frequently he uses the Plume. This results in different scenarios and allies, and eventually leads to one of three endings; the most positive outcome is achieved by opting not to use the Plume at all. Though not quite as memorable as its predecessors, *Covenant of the Plume* is a well-written and appropriately dark *Valkyrie Profile* side chapter.

This may not be the proper third *Valkyrie Profile* game that fans might want … but it's still a decent take on the formula, rendered in SRPG fashion.

ASH: Archaic Sealed Heat

Developer: Mistwalker/Racjin | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): DS

Designed by Hironobu Sakaguchi's Mistwalker studio, *Archaic Sealed Heat* tells the story of a young princess, Aisya who, at her coronation, witnesses the destruction of her kingdom by a flying fire serpent. Aisya discovers she can bring her subjects back to fight by her side as sentient constructs made of ash. Players put together their own teams of ash warriors and, led by Aisya, battle through 31 chapters, and more than 40 hours of gameplay to reclaim the bracelet of Millinear, which restores her land and people.

While the battles themselves follow a fairly standard turned-based JRPG formula, movement and the challenge of setting up those battles to your advantage are where *ASH* innovates. Teams are formed from up to three characters, each of whom draws on a shared set of action points to move and initiate combat. Characters move separately but battle together, making the distance between each character and the targeted enemy part of an entertaining move-plotting calculus.

The game's story is very strong, and its approach to the SRPG formula feels fresh even now.

NINTENDO DS
Nintendo
ASH
ARCHAIC SEALED HEAT

It even features music by Hitoshi Sakimoto and Masahari Iwata, the composers from *Final Fantasy Tactics*. Unfortunately, the game is let down by its awful user interface. Game control is done entirely with the stylus, and requires a double tap on every command from menus to battle and, unfortunately, making navigation twice as laborious as it needs to be.

ASH: Archaic Sealed Heat was initially intended for release outside of Japan, but perhaps due to its poor reception in its home country, the English localisation was cancelled.

Many early DS games required the use of the touch screen and stylus, even though standard controls would've worked just perfectly. *Archaic Sealed Heat* unfortunately fell victim to this.

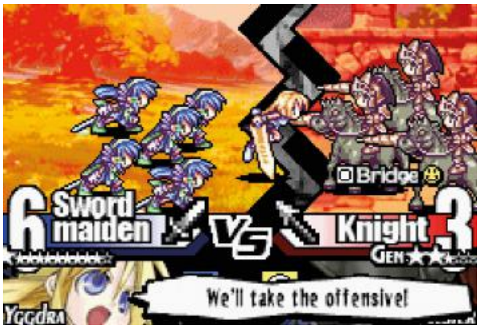
Yggdra Union

Developer: Sting | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): GBA, PSP

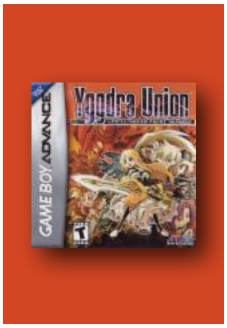
Yggdra Union begins with the basic mould for a tactical strategy RPG and gives it a good shakedown, mixing in elements of *Fire Emblem*, *Ogre Battle*, and *Dragon Force*. You move your units on an overhead-view map and visit towns to gain items, and even the Axe/Sword/Spear weapon triangle is the same as *Fire Emblem*. That's where the similarities end. Before you begin each level, you're given the option to choose a hand of cards. One is selected in each turn, to determine how many movements your units can make, as well as your striking power and special abilities. Units can only attack once per turn, but nearby units can join in a union, depending on their position and the leader's gender – horizontally and vertically if female, or X-shaped if male. The maps are a bit smaller than in other strategy games; however, each scenario usually has a few hidden areas that open up once objectives are met.

Combat begins showing the opposing armies on each side of the screen as they duke it out. Here, you don't directly control the outcome but you can influence it by placing your army into offensive, neutral, or defensive stances. When the power bar is filled, you can use a special attack based on the card you've chosen. Defeated units don't technically die, but rather lose morale.

The story is a throwaway, focusing on the thief Milanor as he helps the princess Yggdra retake the throne. The sprite-based combat looks fantastic, but the super-duper cutesy character designs don't feel appropriate for the serious war story here. The flashy combat and the exciting music make it feel more energetic than most SRPGs, so it's worth a look.



We'll take the offensive!



***Yggdra Union* is technically the second title in *Sting's Dept. Heaven* series, a follow-up to *Riviera*, but they have little in common.**

Gungnir

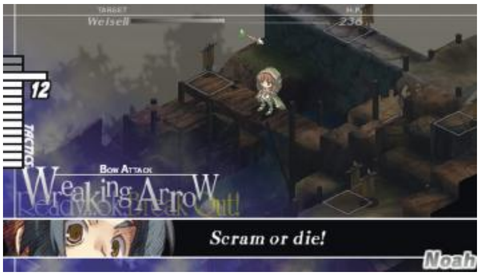
Developer: Sting | Released: 2011 | Platform(s): PSP

Yggdra Union was followed by a few Japan-only sequels and spinoffs, like *Blaze Union*, a PSP prequel, and *Yggdra Unison*, a DS real-time strategy game. Neither were localised, but Atlus did bring out their next SRPG, *Gungnir*.

Giulio Raguel, son of the first leader of Esperanza, is chosen as the new carrier of the legendary spear, Gungnir, and the power of the war gods. With this new power, and in turn hope, Giulio and his resistance make their move to topple the oppressive empire. With regard to its tone, it features heavier story elements such as classism and racism, losing one's self to the killing, and slavery. While not as bold as, say, *Shin Megami Tensei*, in its story, it is a welcome change of pace, especially with its more down-to-earth story conflicts.

As one of Sting's SRPG line-up, the game includes copious amounts of gameplay experimentation, such as how the turn order is conducted. The player's forces share a turn, with a shorter delay than the enemy units get. When the enemy's turn arrives, they come in full force. Given this, proper management is key to survival. In addition, there are various mechanics to delve into, such as vitality management, recruiting mercenaries, weapon proficiencies, and more.

As standard for Sting SRPGs, the game is certainly not for everyone, though not because it's poorly done. The unorthodox turn order can be hard to utilise properly with multiple units at a time, thus deterring players. Coupled with strange style choices with regard to character art and UI, it is a challenge for newcomers. Yet, if the game is embraced for what it is, a hard-to-forget journey will be the reward.



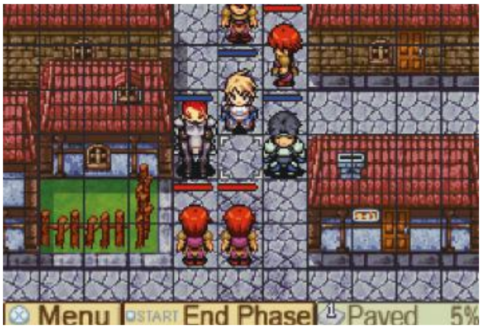
Scram or die!

PSP
Gungnir

***Gungnir* is Episode IX of the *Dept. Heaven* series and is the last of its line, as Sting then shifted mostly to contract work.**

Rondo of Swords

Developer: Success | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): DS



An RPG's combat system can make or break its game. However, a truly good game knows when to try something unexpected. *Rondo of Swords* does just that, and has thus managed to remain one of the most unique RPGS around. It's also one of the most notoriously difficult RPGs on the Nintendo DS.

Referred to in-game as the RMS or Route Maneuver System, this combat system focuses on optimal movement through enemies that you attack along the way. Mêlée units aim to attack enemies from the side or the back, for increased damage and reduced chance of guarding or counter-attacking, while ranged units such as archers and mages attack in specific formations that often cover a wider area of the map.

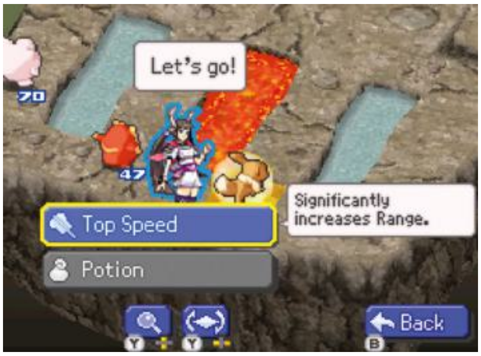
The story of *Rondo of Swords* has diverging paths, which allows for the multiple playthroughs needed to meet the expansive cast of characters. Unlocking some of them requires that various conditions be met. Some of the members of the cast come from developer company Success' previous works, such as *Cotton* and *Izuna: The Unemployed Ninja.*

Outside of its unique combat, *Rondo of Swords* also allows for side expeditions, on which your characters can discover items, enhance stats and skills, and unlock new classes for themselves. Some of these can't be attained until at least the second playthrough, increasing the game's replayability quite a bit. While little has come from many of the people involved in *Rondo of Swords*, it was illustrated by the artist BUNBUN, who would later go on to illustrate the *Sword Art Online* light novels.

The Route Maneuver System, which combines movement and combat, makes *Rondo of Swords* feel quite a bit different from its peers.

Pokémon Conquest

Developer: Nintendo/Koei | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): DS



Significantly increases Range.

There are many strange crossovers in the video game world. Known in Japan as *Pokémon + Nobunaga's Ambition*, this game was later renamed and released under the title *Pokémon Conquest*. It combines *Pokémon*, a Herculean turn-based catch, evolve, and battle franchise, with the grand strategy simulation gameplay of the *Nobunaga's Ambition* series. What ultimately came out was an addictive turn-based combat, kingdom management, strategy RPG, with special upgrade requirements to bring out the full potential of each of the 37 unique Warlords, their Pokémon, and their respective stories.

The Ransei Region is locked in endless war. Warlords vie to unite the world under their vision, but only one can claim victory, with their trusted Pokémon companion. With your faithful Eevee by your side, you begin your journey to unify the ever-changing kingdoms of Ransei.

Instead of the traditional *Pokémon* levelling system, the more you use them in battle, the stronger their bond becomes. This allows them to evolve and increase your army's overall strength. Battles are fought on unique, isometric maps with special mechanics that encourage clever strategies to defeat your enemy, ranging from simple bounce pads to reach the higher ground to slippery ice you can use to knock your enemies around.

Pokémon Conquest was directed by Osamu Mieda who went on to direct *Samurai Warriors 4*. The soundtrack, which was composed by Shinichiro Nakamura, of the Koei Sound Team, enhances the journey through a Sengoku-inspired *Pokémon* world.

Seeing Sengoku-era Japanese warlords battle each other with Pokémon is amusing in its own right, but it doesn't hurt that this is one of the best spinoffs in the franchise.

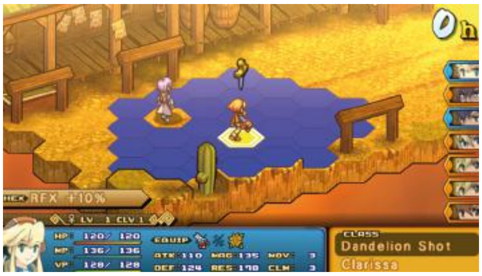
Wild Arms XF

Developer: Media.Vision | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): PSP

Wild Arms XF ("Crossfire") is a competent strategy RPG spinoff of the Wild West-themed PlayStation games, with its fair share of quirks, some of which serve it well, and some of which get in its way.

The plot is convoluted in a way that only strategy RPGs seem to be able to pull off. You play as Clarissa Arwin, a girl who travels to the kingdom of Elesius to retrieve her mother's sword from a ruthless drifter named Rupert. What could have been a straightforward MacGuffin hunt becomes instead a dense and complicated political conflict, as Clarissa somehow becomes the leader of a movement to overthrow the current rulers of the kingdom.

The battlefield grid in *XF* is hex-rather than square-based. This means six different sides vulnerable to attack at any given time. The character classes are mostly comparable to ordinary Black Mage, Knight, etc., but are generally defined in terms of stats and tricks rather than defensive versus offensive. Sacred Slayers, for example, are important because they have good defence against magic spells have the ability to cast spells on several hexagons at once. Battles are heavily puzzle-oriented. The stronger you get, the easier it becomes to brute-force your way through most encounters, but, especially in the first chapter, you'll find yourself drudging through tedious micro-management. Levelling up takes a lot of time, drawing out this process.



The music by Masato Koda and Noriyasu Agematsu is undeniably beautiful. Where the setting lacks Wild West vibes, the music rushes in, as always, with twangy guitar and whistling. Add the bright visuals, and the game looks and sounds great; the story also gets surprisingly dark later on. Issues with the gameplay are thus that much more of a shame.

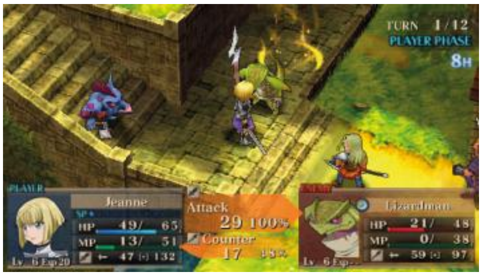
Strategy spinoffs of JRPG series were becoming common by this point, and *Wild Arms XF* does some interesting things with this trend.

Jeanne d'Arc

Developer: Level-5 | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): PSP

Imagine an anime retelling of the Joan of Arc legend and you'll have a pretty good idea of what this Level-5 SRPG is about. The heroine, Jeanne, wields a magical armlet and is commanded by a voice from the heavens to lead France against not only the British troops, but also the demons they've made an unholy pact with. Other historical figures that pop up here include military commander La Hire and knight Gilles de Rais.

Much of this game heavily resembles *Final Fantasy Tactics*, right down to its interface, though it introduces a few unique mechanics. Whenever a friendly unit attacks a foe, it leaves behind a little glow called a Burning Aura, into which allies can step, enabling infliction of more damaging attacks. Units that huddle together also provide enhanced Unified Guard defence. There's also a *Fire Emblem*-style rock-paper-scissors damage system, based on three element types: Sol, Stella, and Luna. Certain characters, including Jeanne, can also equip gems onto their armbands for various time-limited effects. Otherwise, there's nowhere near the level of customisability found in other SRPGs.



In terms of other PSP SRPGs, *Final Fantasy Tactics* was released around the same time, in 2007, one of the best of its genre, but also a clunky port of a game that was nearly a decade old at the time it came out. *Jeanne d'Arc*, on the other hand, has fully 3D graphics and cel-shaded character models that take fuller advantage of the system's capabilities. It's not nearly as in-depth, so SRPG fans might find it a little simple for their tastes, plus the story and soundtrack are nowhere near the quality of other strategy greats. But those looking for a more straightforward experience will find something enjoyable.

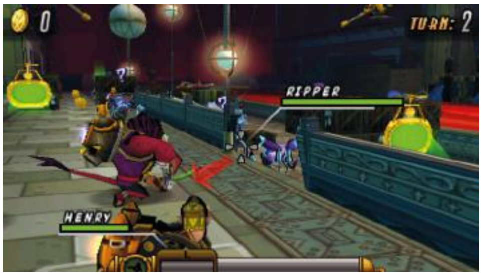
Relive the Hundred Years War, except with demons and dwarves, in this fairly decent SRPG.

Code Name: S.T.E.A.M.

Developer: Nintendo/Intelligent Systems | Released: 2015 | Platform(s): 3DS

In a fictional late 19th century, dominated by steampunk technology, public-domain English literary heroes like Henry Fleming, John Henry, and more come face to face with Lovecraftian aliens invading Earth! S.T.E.A.M., the Strike Team Eliminating the Alien Menace, must carry out Abraham Lincoln's orders to save London, the United States, and lands hitherto unexplored where the Great Shugguth has taken root.

Code Name S.T.E.A.M. remains an underrated experiment in SRPG design by the *Fire Emblem* studio. Taking elements from contemporaries like *X-COM* and *Valkyria Chronicles*, the game puts you in charge of squads fighting through multiple battles per chapter. S.T.E.A.M. members each have a steam engine; its boiler's capacity determines how many moves its character can make per round. Surviving combat requires careful steam management, splitting movement and actions effectively, and making use of stage hazards and characters' special traits to defend and advance. As you have neither mini-map nor battle preview, S.T.E.A.M. encourages slow but steady map exploration and calculated risks.



The game has numerous strengths, from its multi-faceted battle designs to a unique mix of heavy metal and Japanese manga-like audiovisuals. Long thinking times during enemy turns was a problem in the initial release, though this was later patched. Stage construction can be confusing too, due to the lack of a map, and since enemies constantly respawn, battles are often stressful. Fighting alongside characters like Tiger Lily, Queequeg, and the Wizard of Oz troupe is amusing, though. While the *Fire Emblem* mould remains dominant at Intelligent Systems, *S.T.E.A.M.* continues to have a fervent following.

Code Name: S.T.E.A.M. **has a number of design quirks that are often frustrating, but meet it on its own terms, and it's just as good as other Intelligent Systems SRPGs.**

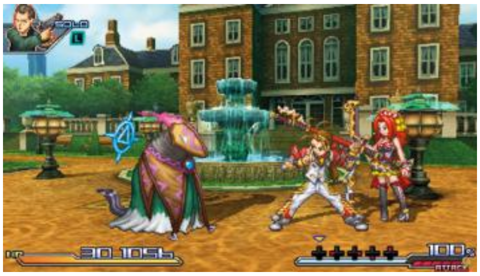
Project X Zone

Developer: Monolith Soft | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): 3DS

Namco, Capcom, and SEGA are three companies that have had a historic impact on the video game industry. It only seems natural for them to collaborate to make an epic crossover featuring dozens of their franchises – everything from mainstream titles such as *Street Fighter* and *Tekken* through lesser-known series like *Sakura Wars* and *.hack* to downright obscurities like *Genpei Toumaden* and *Youkai Douchuuki*. It even features SEGA's mid-'90s Japanese mascot Segata Sanshiro.

The series began back in 2005 as the Japan-only PS2 game *Namco X Capcom*, itself a spinoff of a Wonderswan SRPG called *Namco Super Wars*. While the characters in this game were probably too obscure for non-Japanese players, the follow-ups have more internationally recognisable faces. They in turn led to two sequels for the 3DS under the title *Project X Zone*, adding SEGA characters for the second game and Nintendo ones for *Project X Zone 2: Brave New World*.

Gameplay for *Project X Zone* follows a style similar to that of *Valkyria Profile*. Unit attacks are allocated to specific button and directional combinations. There are two unit types: Pair Units, which feature two characters teaming up, and Solo Units, which can be equipped to Pair Units. This allows for long combos that, when timed right, juggle enemies in the air for increased damage. Maps are grid-based and often have gimmicks that change how you approach each stage.



As with *Super Robot Wars*, the tactical parts of the game are merely okay, as they're really just an excuse to see all of the disparate characters interact. The localisation and dialogue for the second game in particular are hilarious.

Soichiro Morizumi wrote and directed each game in the *Project X Zone* series, and had previously worked on the *Super Robot Wars* franchise.

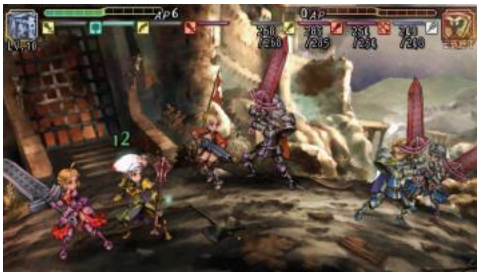
Grand Knights History

Developer: Vanillaware | Released: 2011 | Platform(s): PSP

Grand Knights History is an intriguing tactical strategy game from Vanillaware that was designed to incorporate online features. Working as a military officer in one of three kingdoms, you train units of four warriors by putting them into combat. The fights are turn-based, with each unit inhabiting a space on a 3 × 4 grid. There are several classes of unit (Knights, Archers, Gunners, Magicians and so forth) with different attack abilities. Once you've trained your units, then you send them to the online War mode, in which they face off against units trained by other players. The game is different from MMOs in that there's no persistent connection to the internet – rather, much of the game is technically played offline, so it uploads and downloads new data to the server whenever the state of the world map is updated. Additionally, you're never directly playing against another person, just against the teams they've created, which are controlled by the CPU.

At least, that's how the game used to function. Unfortunately, the online servers were only active for just over two years before being shut off. It's just as well, since access to the servers was IP blocked, making it difficult for non-Japanese players to experience even if they imported the game. Technically, you can still play in single player mode, but without the multiplayer aspect, there's not much point to it, since there's no real progress to make beyond training units. Ultimately, all that's left is appreciating its gorgeous 2D artwork and rousing soundtrack, both of which are hallmarks of Vanillaware titles.

Despite its brief life, the spirit of *Grand Knights History* lives in its spiritual successor, *Grand Kingdom*, which was released internationally in 2015.



XSeed attempted to localise *Grand Knights History* for North America, but Vanillaware cancelled it. Pity, but the game didn't have a long life anyway.

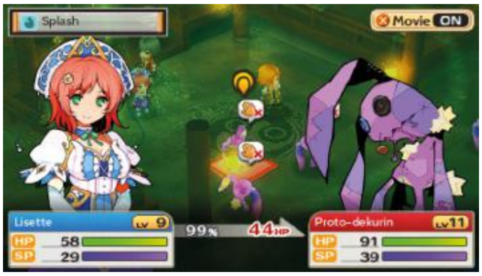
Stella Glow

Developer: Imageepoch | Released: 2015 | Platform(s): 3DS

Stella Glow was intended to mark the tenth anniversary of Imageepoch's founding. Unfortunately it couldn't have come at a worse time, as the company declared bankruptcy just before its release, so *Stella Glow* was released an entire month after Imageepoch closed for good.

The spiritual successor to their earlier, and rather unremarkable, *Luminous Arc* series, *Stella Glow* is a turn-based strategy RPG set in a world in which the act of singing has been prohibited by God. Existing on the margins are witches, able to control magic through forbidden music. When amnesiac Alto's village is razed by the Destruction Witch Hilda, his childhood friend Lisette awakens as the Water Witch to protect him with her voice. The two then find themselves tasked with travelling the world to persuade the rest of the witches to unite against Hilda. It's a fairly by-the-numbers strategy game that will be immediately familiar to those who've played any number of games of the genre, though there is a fun risk-reward mechanic in which the player is encouraged to attack higher-level monsters for a big experience payday. Each witch has a unique song, each an individual upbeat J-Pop track, which has a different effect on the battlefield, like a regen effect for party members.

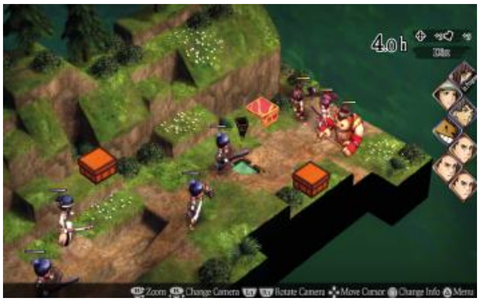
Like much of Imageepoch's oeuvre, *Stella Glow* is a harem game. In between battles Alto engages in dating sim segments with the different witches, building them up with his suave compliments, which eventually gain him additional battle skills. There's cleavage, panty shots, and suggestive scenes in which a magical phallic object is inserted into a witch's chest to draw out her potential. It's a fitting final effort from Imageepoch, who died as they lived: incredibly horny.



***Stella Glow* is Imagepoch's swansong, picked up by SEGA and Atlus just as the company failed, and it's actually pretty good as far as SRPGs go.**

God Wars

Developer: Kadokawa Games | Released: 2017 | Platform(s): PS4, PSV, NSW, WIN



PS4
GOD WARS
FUTURE PAST

God Wars: Future Past is a strategy RPG based on the Kojiki, a chronicle that's the basis for many Japanese myths. While the genre has been typified by medieval fantasy, thanks to *Fire Emblem* and *Tactics Ogre,* this story takes place in feudal Japan, featuring characters like Kaguya, Sakuya, Kintaro, Susanoo, Issun, Momotarou, Amaterasu, Urashima, and many other gods, goddesses, and others from Japanese folklore.

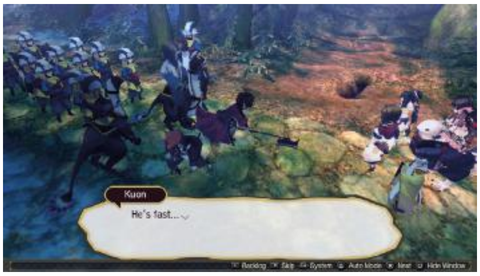
The game is very much in the style of *Final Fantasy Tactics,* with a few notable tweaks. Characters have three job classes each – their Main Job and their Sub Job, which can be changed, and their Unique Job, which is inherent to that character and is fixed. This allows quite a bit of flexibility in customising your units. MP starts at zero and charges throughout each battle, and there's a big emphasis on using the many skills you can learn. The game also adopts a Hate statistic, which will make enemies target you if you enrage them.

The visuals, which are entirely 3D modelled, feel a little low-budget and don't have the charm of the 2D games, though the character art by Mino Tarou (*Love Plus*) and monster art by Sawaki Takeyasu (*Devil May Cry*) provide some interesting interpretations of classic Japanese figures. The core strategy mechanics are excellent, but the overall presentation is a little lacklustre, the music is dull, and the story isn't particularly interesting. Had this been released in the 32-bit era, it would've been written off as a mere clone of better titles … but due to the rarity of this type of strategy RPG when it was released in 2017, especially across multiple platforms, it fills a niche that had gone vacant for too long.

***God Wars* is very much *Okami* in the form of a strategy RPG, though it's not quite as charmingly developed as Capcom's game.**

Utawarerumono (series)

Developer: Leaf/AquaPlus/Sting | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): WIN, PSP, PSV, PS4


Kuon

He's fast...

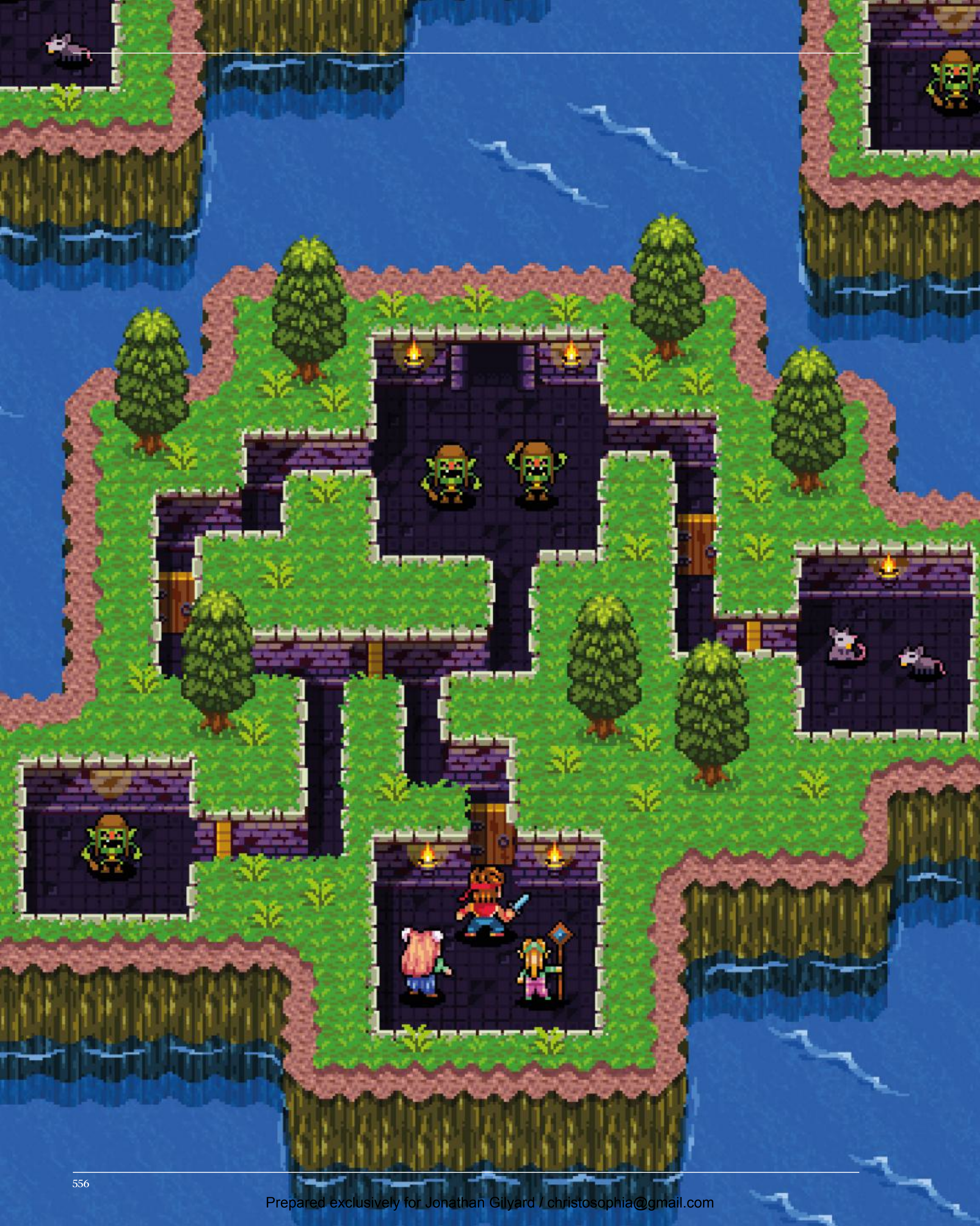
PS4
UTAWARERUMONO
PRELUDE TO THE FALLEN

Utawarerumono is a trilogy that began on Windows platforms, developed by adult game company Leaf (*To Heart*). The first game focuses on a young man named Hakuoro, who awakens to find himself in a mysterious village that resembles Sengoku-era Japan filled with part-beast people. After learning of their oppression by a nearby lord, he helps lead a rebellion, toppling the lord and then becoming a leader himself … only to find that being a ruler isn't so easy, as he must both lead his people and learn about his past.

Like many PC games of the time, the original release was a pornographic game, with a number of adult cutscenes, though the strong characters and storyline, not to mention an attractive art style based on Japanese Ainu culture, gave it a wide appeal, resulting in an anime and all-ages console ports. Two sequels, subtitled *Mask of Truth* and *Mask of Deception,* were released further down the line, which don't directly continue the story, at least initially, but do tie in strongly. The original game was not released internationally (though the anime was) but these two sequels came out in English via Atlus. There's also an action game, *Utawarerumono Zan,* which retells parts of the third game, as well as an HD remake of the original, *Prelude to the Fallen,* which was released in English in 2020.

This series is really more of a visual novel than a strategy game – there are tactical battle sections, but you'll spend far more time reading than playing it. They're also typical of the genre, and not too difficult, but at least they present battles as something more than just text. Another visual novel/SRPG hybrid from Leaf is *Tears to Tiara,* the second of which was localised for the PS3, though it's not as well regarded as this series.

For quite a while, the visual novel/ adventure game genre on PCs mostly needed adult content to sell, but in some cases, the stories were so good they could stand on their own.



First-Person Dungeon Crawlers

First-person dungeon crawlers were among the earliest role-playing game types. In the early days of computer gaming, the player would wander through a maze rendered in wireframes, moving one block at a time, only able to turn 90°. It was tough going, as using graph paper to make maps of the dungeons was often critical to successful crusades, but plenty rewarding in its own right. Sir-Tech's *Wizardry*, first released in the United States in 1981, was one of the most popular of these, and actually took on a life of its own in Japan. A number of similar games were created for the Japanese market, for both PCs and consoles, particularly the famous *Shin Megami Tensei* series from Atlus.

However, through the early '90s, the Japanese RPG audience became more acclimatised to games like *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*, which were much more user-friendly, and first-person dungeon crawlers eventually became the realm of the hardcore. With the introduction of 3D technology in the mid-'90s, the "square-by-square" movement found in the older games was beginning to feel outdated, and even the *Shin Megami Tensei* series phased out the first-person dungeons, with 1997's *Soul Hackers* being the last to use them.

A small group of fans kept the spirit alive for a number of years, but it was Atlus, again, that brought about their resurgence, with 2007's *Etrian Odyssey* for the Nintendo DS. This was an intentional retro throwback, but with some modern accommodations, particularly the ability to draw your own map on the bottom touch screen. The title's success also sparked the resurrection of *Wizardry*, along with similar titles like *Elminage*, which may as well be *Wizardry* with the serial numbers filed off.

This was also a boon to smaller publishers – dungeon RPGs are relatively cheap to make, so they were able to pump out games that featured attractive character art, typically of cutesy or scantily-clad girls, and then stick them into the standard design template, selling them to a small but faithful audience. Despite the inherent cynicism, not all of these titles are poor quality, but you have to know what you're getting into.

Broadly speaking, first-person dungeon crawlers tend to allow greater party customisation, with an emphasis on combat and exploration, rather than storytelling. This isn't always the case, especially with games aimed towards a slightly more casual audience, but there are enough instances out there to prove the stereotype true. Of course, there's also the debate about whether these games are technically Japanese RPGs, since they're all based on *Wizardry*, an American game. But they've also evolved their own unique aesthetic and can thus be considered their own sub-genre, especially since, outside of a few Western-developed games like *Legend of Grimrock*, they're the ones keeping this type of game alive.

Mapping out elaborate hallways and rooms is one of the key aspects of first-person dungeon crawlers.

R1- Change Angle

Wizardry (series)

Developer: assorted companies | Released: 1985 | Platform(s): NES, SNES, PS1, PS2, GB, PSP and more

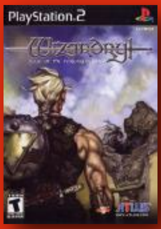
Wizardry, developed by Andrew C. Greenberg and Robert Woodhead, and first published by Sir-Tech in 1981, is one of the foundational computer role-playing games. However, for a Western game, it's quite unusual in that its longevity and popularity were greater in Japan, where it received a number of tie-in manga, as well as an anime OVA. After *Wizardry VII*, the series petered out during the early '90s in North America; its final entry, *Wizardry 8*, wasn't released until 2001, nearly a decade later. However, various Japanese publishers and developers continued the series on their own, with many exclusive ports and entries released only in Japanese. The rights have been tangled up with assorted publishers and developers over the years, and following the series lineage can be quite confusing.

Japan was first introduced to *Wizardry* on imported Apple II computers, and guides were created to help players wade through the English text. The official Japanese localisation did not arrive until 1985, when it was published by ASCII for the PC88, PC98, Sharp X1, FM-7, and MZ-2500 computers. However, as with most video games at the time, the series didn't really take off until it hit the Famicom in 1987. The package artwork for these versions was handled by fantasy artist Jun Suemi, and new music was composed by Japanese pianist Kentarou Haneda, who lent a classical feel to the soundtrack to compete with Koichi Sugiyama's music in the *Dragon Quest* games. In order to help port the game from PASCAL, Masanobu Endou, the programmer behind *The Tower of Druaga* and *Xevious* for Namco, was enlisted. The series continued on the Famicom (and home computers like the MSX2) until the third entry, then jumped to more powerful consoles like the PC Engine and Super Famicom. Many of the later entries were also ported to the PlayStation and Saturn, some of which also had English support built-in, making these the best versions for English-speaking players. *Wizardry VII* was also ported to the 32-bit consoles exclusively in Japan.

The Japanese original *Wizardry* games began with the *Wizardry Gaiden* games for the Game Boy, also published by ASCII. Based on *Wizardry V*, these were basically new scenarios. The first three, *Suffering of the Queen*, *Curse of the Ancient Emperor*, and *Scripture of the Dark*, were for the Game Boy, with the fourth, *Throb of the Demon's Heart*, released for the Super Famicom. When the series hit the PlayStation, it was renamed *Wizardry Dimguil*, though this is the fifth *Wizardry Gaiden* game in all but name. Around 2005, some of the same team formed 59 Studio to create two more *Wizardry Gaiden* games: *Prisoners of the Battles* and *Five Ordeals*, released for Windows, PlayStation 2, and smartphones. These also supported user-created scenarios.

There was also the *Wizardry Empire* series, published by Starfish, which began on the Game Boy Color and was based more on the older entries. When the series moved to the PlayStation, the developers began using the newer ruleset and

Nochan
WAR
032/032
Kyo
NIN
028/028
Ricardo
WAR
034/034
Sara
PRI
018/018
Creo
SOR
022/022
Calo
THI
026/026



Most of the Japanese *Wizardry* games stayed there, but Atlus' *Tale of the Forsaken Land* for the PlayStation 2 made it overseas.

***Wizardry* was so popular in Japan it received an anime OVA adaptation as well as several game books and novels.**

made the games a bit more like *Wizardry Gaiden*. The PlayStation entries are subtitled *Princess of the Ancient*, *Legacy of the Princess*, and *Ancestry of the Emperor*. There was also *Wizardry Asterisk* for the Nintendo DS in 2005. The team behind these games later ditched the *Wizardry* name and created their own spinoff entry, *Elminage*.

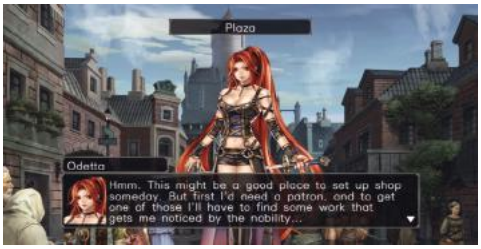
Wizardry Chronicle was released for Windows in 2000 by KSS, and changes up some of the races and character classes, but otherwise isn't much different from the very early games. *Wizardry Summoner* was another spinoff, originally created for the Game Boy Advance in 2001. This adds a new Summoner class, which lets the character capture and summon monsters, a reflection of the *Pokémon*-induced monster-collecting craze of the time. This followed with a PlayStation 2 remake in 2005.

Atlus then got its shot at the licence with two games for the *Busin: Wizardry Alternative* series for the PlayStation 2. These use fully 3D-modelled environments, making them feel a little more modern than some of the other *Wizardry* games of the time, though they're still obviously fairly low budget. They are more narrative-heavy too, as while you can create the protagonist, your party members have pre-specified personalities and are incorporated into the story. This series was produced by Kouji Okada, one of the creators of the *Megami Tensei* series, with monster design by manga artist Katsuya Terada. The first game was actually released in English under the name *Wizardry: Tale of the Forsaken Land*.

The next series was *Wizardry Xth*, developed by Michaelsoft. These games take place in an anime school setting, with the students venturing through dungeons in VR. *Academy of Frontier* and *Unlimited Students* were released for the PlayStation 2. The second entry was remade and ported to the PSP by Zerodiv, and was released internationally by Atlus as *Class of Heroes*. This then spun off into its own sub-series, originally developed by Motoya Ataka, who had previously worked on the *Wizardry Empire* titles at Starfish. Eventually he left, along with a group known as Team Muramasa to form the developer Experience.

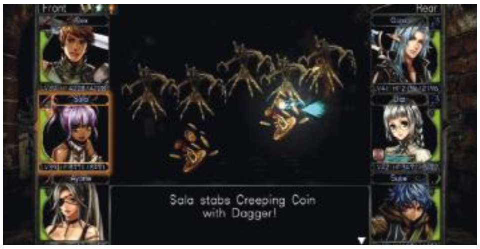
In 2006, the *Wizardry* brand was bought by Aeria IPM, which is why a lot of later spinoffs were published without the *Wizardry* name. They also put out their own line of games for HD platforms as part of the Wizardry Renaissance project, published by their subsidiary Acquire, including *Prisoners of the Lost City* and *Labyrinth of Lost Souls* by Zerodiv (the latter of which was released internationally by XSeed). These maintain the feel of the classic *Wizardry* games but use HD illustrated graphics.

They also put out *Pledge of Life* and *Boukyaku no Isan* ("Heritage of Oblivion") for the Nintendo DS, by Suzak and Genterprise. There was also a free-to-play MMORPG called *Wizardry Online* that began in 2011, developed by Headlock and maintained by Game Pot. An English version from Sony Online closed in 2014, while the Japanese version ran until 2016.



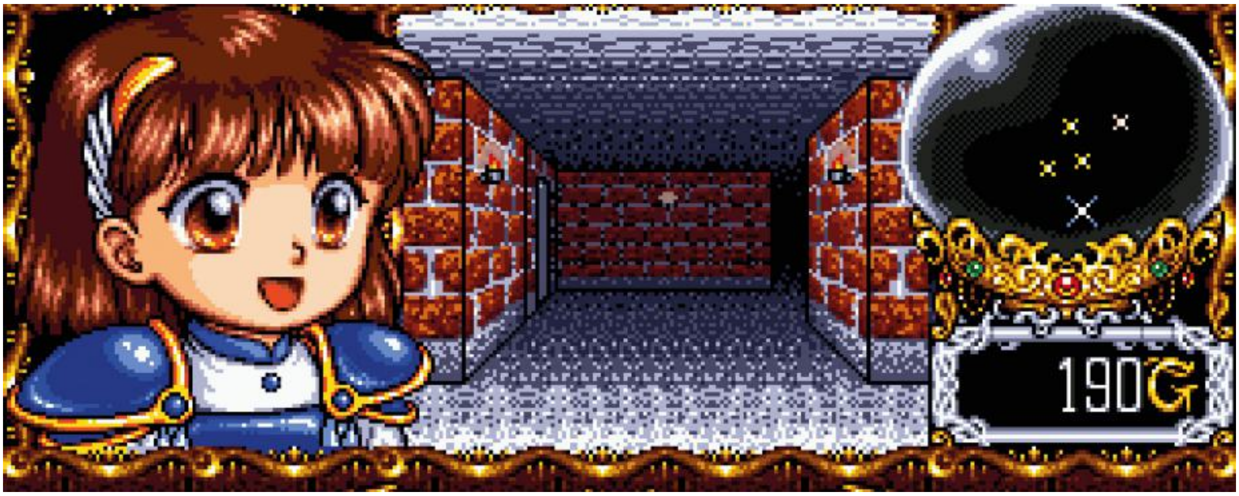
Odetta

Hmm. This might be a good place to set up shop someday. But first I'd need a patron, and to get one of those I'll have to find some work that gets me noticed by the nobility...



Sala stabs Creeping Coin with Dagger!

***Wizardry: Labyrinth of Lost Souls* is the most recent Japanese entry to see international release.**



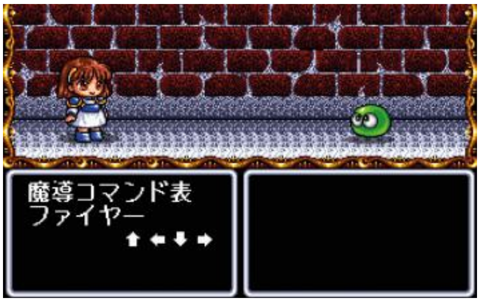
Madou Monogatari (series)

Developer: Compile | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): MSX2, PC88, PC98, WIN, MD, SFC, SAT and more

Madou Monogatari ("Sorcery Saga") is the main RPG franchise from developer/publisher Compile. Beginning as a fairly simple first-person dungeon crawler for Japanese computers, its main star is a young magician named Arle, along with her little buddy Carbuncle, but it also includes a variety of other cutesy and amusing characters. While familiar to the PC audience, the cast became much better known through their inclusion in the company's *Puyo Puyo* competitive puzzle series, to the point where most gamers probably recognise the characters from these games rather than the RPG that they sprang from. The series was originally designed by Kazunari Yonemitsu, though he left Compile after the original set of games was created and went to Sting.

The series had rather inauspicious beginnings, as a short game included in one of Compile's DiskStation releases for the MSX2. Called *Madou Monogatari Episode II: Carbuncle,* it features Arle as a teenager, trapped in a maze and hunted down by a swordsman named Schezo. It was popular enough that Compile fleshed out the concept for retail release, releasing it for both the MSX2 and PC98 as *Madou Monogatari 1-2-3*. This includes three episodes: the first focuses on Arle as a child, undertaking her final test to graduate from basic magical school; the second is a remake of the original DiskStation game, in which she meets the happy little Carbuncle and his former owner, the dark prince Satan (who's actually a rather amusing fellow despite being an antagonist); and the third faces Arle off against a martial artist named Rulue and her minotaur servant. A sequel was later released, called *Madou Monogatari A-R-S,* with three new scenarios, starring Arle, Rulue, and Schezo. One of the main enemies is a little parody of the *Dragon Quest* slime, called a Puyo. (These little blobs were featured as the blocks you need to connect in the *Puyo Puyo* puzzle game series.) While the mood is generally quite silly, these games aren't really meant for kids, and occasionally there will be some horrific scene in which cutesy characters contrast with gory events, particularly near the end of the first episode, when Arle's classmates seem to be melting.

These games are fairly simple dungeon crawlers, in which you only control a single character and turn-based encounters are fought one-on-one. Combat uses a "fuzzy parameter" system, whereby HP and MP are not displayed as numbers, but rather inferred from graphical portraits. As Arle takes damage, she grows sadder; as she grows in experience, the gems around the interface will light up. Most of the magic attacks (and other actions) are accompanied by digitised speech, assuming the computer hardware supports it – it's quite scratchy, but was mighty impressive for an 8-bit computer like the MSX2. The game is generally easy to play and even features an auto-map – in other words, along with the cutesy character designs and funny dialogue, these were aimed more towards casual gamers than hardcore *Wizardry* fans.


魔導コマンド表
ファイヤー
⬆⬅⬇➡

MEGA DRIVE
魔導物語I

The Mega Drive port of *Madou Monogatari,* pictured on this page, is the most attractive version of the original game, though it tells only a fraction of the adventures of Arle the sorceress.

As *Puyo Puyo* rocketed to popularity in Japanese arcades in 1991, the original PC games were ported to other platforms. The first game popped up on both the Mega Drive and PC Engine, while the entire original trilogy (plus the Arle episode of *A-R-S*) made it to the Game Gear. However, these aren't always straight ports and often substantially remake the story or structure. Assorted spinoff stories from the original set of games were released for Windows as well.

However, first-person dungeon crawlers were going out of style in the early '90s, so later *Madou Monogatari* RPGs took other forms. The first of these was *Madou Monogatari: Hanamaru Daiyouchienji* (literally "Flower Circle Great School", though "flower circle" here is equivalent to a gold star given for good work in school). As a direct prequel to Arle's school test in the first episode, this removes the first-person dungeon crawling in favour of an overhead perspective, and, like the Mega Drive port of the first game, changes the battle scenes to a side-scrolling perspective, making it more like how the characters face off in *Puyo Puyo*. It's a little simple, to the point where it feels like it's made for kids, but it's lively and adorable, illustrating the main aspects the series is known for.

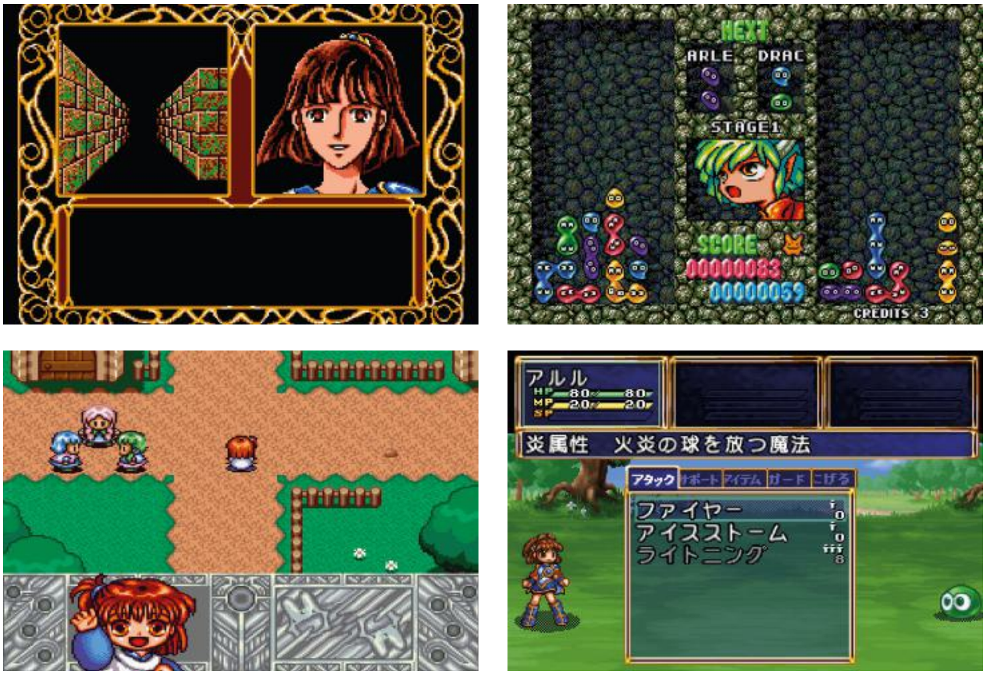
This was followed up by *Waku Waku Puyo Puyo Dungeon*, released for both the Saturn and PlayStation. This is a Rogue-like similar to Chunsoft's *Mystery Dungeon* games, starring assorted *Madou Monogatari* characters. Another game was released for the Saturn, simply called *Madou Monogatari*. Not directly associated with any previous titles, it's something of a reboot for the series, in the mould of a traditional JRPG, while inheriting some elements from the Super Famicom game, though it features Arle as a teenager rather than a child. The maps are isometric, while the battle scenes are presented from a side-view perspective. However, it removes the "fuzzy parameter" aspect, so characters have the standard RPG numeric HP and MP. The sprite-based visuals are excellent, though overall it's a somewhat average RPG. Compile was going through financial difficulties at the time of its development, and there are certain aspects that feel rushed.

After Compile went bankrupt, certain properties were purchased by SEGA, including the characters of Arle and Carbuncle, along with the Puyos. Meanwhile, other parts of the property were picked up by Compile Heart, a sort of spiritual successor to Compile. In 2013, they released a total reboot of the series called *Sei Madou Monogatari*, though since SEGA had bought many of the original characters, the cast is all new, many suspiciously resemble, but are legally distinct from, the original characters. It takes the form of an overhead-view, procedurally-generated, Rogue-like game, so it actually doesn't play much like any of the older games save *Waku Waku Puyo Puyo Dungeon*. It is the only entry in the series to have been released internationally, localised by Aksys under the name *Sorcery Saga: Curse of the Great Curry God*.

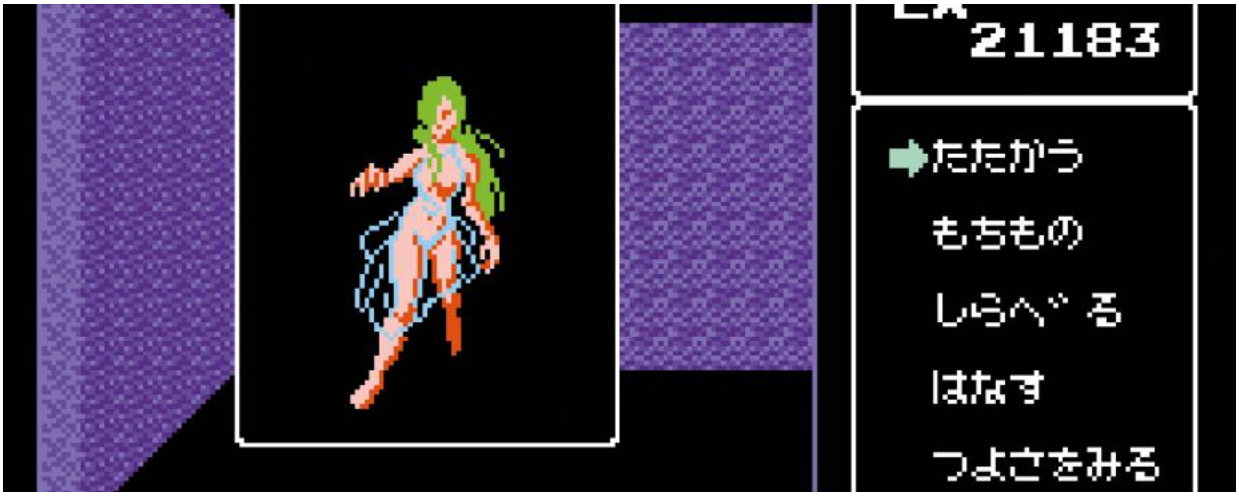
Even though none of the main *Madou Monogatari* games were officially released in English, the original games are relatively easy to play even without much Japanese knowledge, and the fun characters, amusing dialogue, and generally goofiness can be understood in the English *Puyo Puyo* games like *Puyo Puyo Tetris*.

SEGA SATURN
魔導物語

The success of *Puyo Puyo* compelled Compile to continue with the original *Madou Monogatari* RPG series, though they never quite figured out the right formula. Pictured here is the Saturn release.



Clockwise from upper-left, the original *Madou Monogatari Episode II* on the MSX2, *Puyo Puyo* for the arcade, *Madou Monogatari* for the Saturn, and *Madou Monogatari: Hanamaru Daiyouchienji* for the Super Famicom.



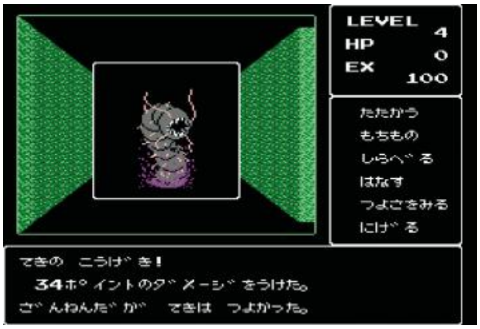
Deep Dungeon (series)

Developer: HummingBirdSoft | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): FDS, MSX, FC

HummingBirdSoft was a company that specialised in adventure games in the early '80s, and began its (brief) journey into consoles with this RPG series, *Deep Dungeon*. It is basically *Wizardry*, but simplified such that kids on the Famicom could play it, as it was the first of its type to appear on the 8-bit platform, predating even *Megami Tensei*.

In the first game, subtitled *Madou Senki* ("Demon Cave War Chronicle") you control a hero delving into a dungeon beneath a town; this dungeon is filled with monsters, who have kidnapped a princess. A warrior named Ruu went in but never came back, so you must follow him in there. As you wander further into the maze, you find that Ruu is actually the final foe. Each floor has its own colour scheme and (rather irritating) music, giving the impression of delving deeper into a creepy underground lair. Much of the game is bare-bones – there is no character creator, you control only a single character, and only battle against one monster at a time.

There is no magic, just items you can purchase from the shop to toss at foes. The wild random number distribution and the high miss ratio also make fights extremely erratic, and there are several bugs. In the sequel, subtitled *Yuushi no Monshou* ("Emblem of the Hero"), reveals that Ruu has been resurrected, and the descendent of the hero from the first game must fight him. It's very similar, though the balance has been tweaked so it's less frustrating. There are two parts of the tower to enter, with the underground areas containing stronger enemies. Both of these games were ported to the MSX, with the sequel changing town exploration to an overhead view.



てきの こうけ゛き!
34ホ゜イントのタ゛メーシ゛をうけた。
さ゛んねんた゛か゛ てきは つよかった。

The third game, *Yuushi e no Tabi* ("The Journey of the Hero") moves to the Famicom cartridge, and expands its scope, having multiple towns and multiple dungeons. It also has basic character creation, adds in magic, and allows you to create a party of four with three different classes. The fourth and final game, *Kuro no Youjutsushi* ("The Black Sorcerer") removes the character creator but instead features a few pre-determined party members who join you along the way. However, a few things have been expanded: you can summon monsters to temporarily fight for you, plus there are actual sub-quests you can go on. This release was published by Asmik rather than DOG/Square.

By 1990, most RPG gamers had moved on from dungeon crawlers to stuff like *Dragon Quest*, and for hardcore fans, there was *Megami Tensei II* and the actual *Wizardry* ports. The series didn't really offer anything that those games didn't, and HummingBirdSoft didn't last much longer anyway. But Square has referenced the *Deep Dungeon* name in a few of its titles, even though it only published the games, rather than developing them. It's the name of the optional location in *Final Fantasy Tactics* that has the strongest enemies and best items, as well as a randomly-generated dungeon in the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV*.

The first two *Deep Dungeon* titles were published by DOG, a group used by Square specifically for Famicom Disk System games.

Shining in the Darkness

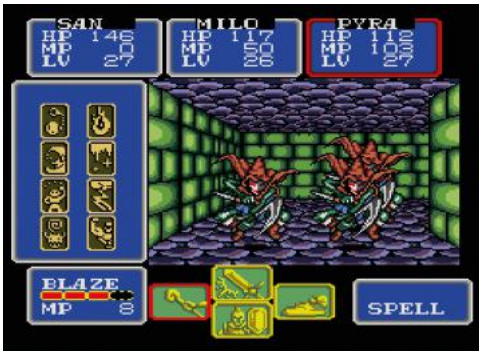
Developer: SEGA | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): GEN

Princess Jessa of the kingdom of Thornwood has been kidnapped by the evil wizard Dark Sol, and is held in the depths of a labyrinth. It's up to the hero to not only rescue her, but also find out what happened to his missing father.

As an early RPG for the Genesis, *Shining in the Darkness* is meant to be accessible to new players. Compared to classic dungeon crawlers like *Wizardry*, it cuts back on the character customisation – there are only three playable characters, all pre-made: the hero, the elf magician Pyra, and the cleric Milo – and if defeated, you're sent back to town, maintaining your experience and items but with your gold halved, à la *Dragon Quest*. But just because it's accessible doesn't mean it's easy, as it still requires careful mapping and plenty of grinding to make your way through its nine floors.

This was the first title by SEGA CD4, later renamed Sonic! Software Planning, before it spun off as Camelot. It has a very friendly, fantasy-storybook feel to it, and eschews boring menus in favour of visually impressive scenes. These include a town explored via a panorama image, where you can choose to visit the inn to rest and talk to various folks, check out the alchemy and armour shops to purchase things, or visit the shrine to check your XP and save your game.

Many of its unique touches, like the visual style and (especially) the interface, on which you pick from nodding "yes" or "no" heads, can be seen in later games, including their *Shining Force* SRPGs, and the *Golden Sun* games. For experienced players, however, it might be a little too simple to play.



GENESIS
Shining in the Darkness

SEGA was keener to cater to Western RPG audiences in the early 16-bit days, which is why titles like *Shining in the Darkness* got localised.

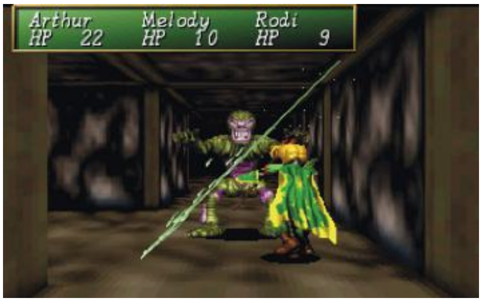
Shining the Holy Ark

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): SAT

The *Shining* series continued with the popular *Shining Force* SRPG series, as well as the *Shining Wisdom* ARPG, before returning to first-person dungeon crawling with *Shining the Holy Ark*. You control a group of mercenaries who get caught up in a war against evil spirits intending to resurrect an ancient kingdom. The story loosely connects to *Shining Force III*, released for the Saturn a bit later down the road, in 1997.

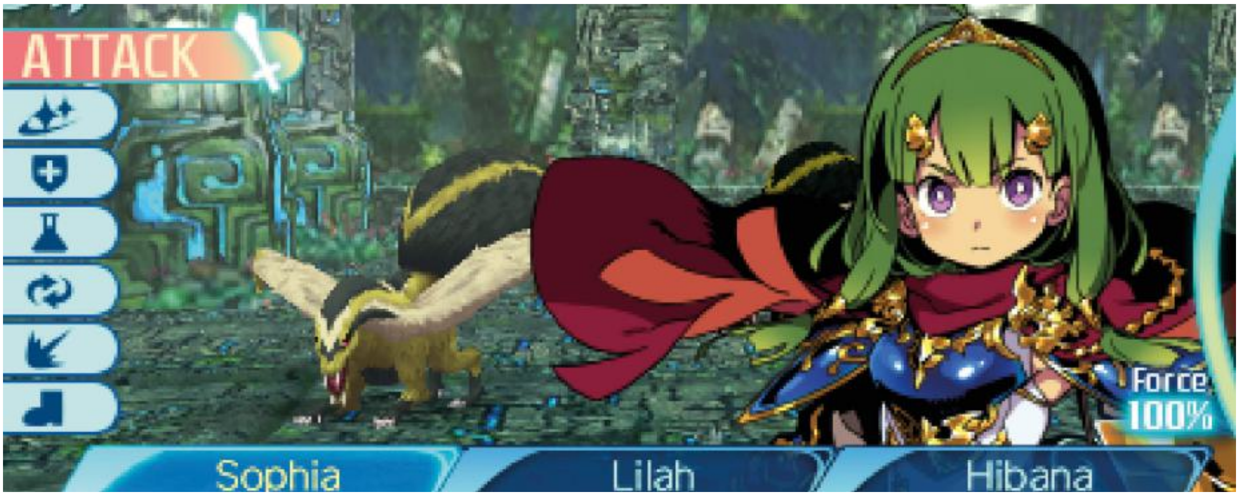
It's a much more fleshed-out game than *Shining in the Darkness*, offering longer, more complex, and more varied dungeons (and an auto-map to help navigation), a total of eight playable characters, and a class promotion system. Combat is basically the same, but there are various pixies you can summon in the brief pre-battle moments; these can let you get in a first strike. The difficulty doesn't require quite as much grinding, but it's still challenging, while remaining accessible for those who aren't *Wizardry* junkies.

The full-screen 3D dungeons, complete with smooth scrolling, are mighty impressive. The viewpoint is always out of the eyes of the protagonist, so the camera leaps forward when he attacks, and his companions are shown jumping into the fray from the sides, then attacking enemies. The CG-rendered bitmap characters are pixelated and look a little dated, but the fight scenes have such energy that many other first-person dungeon crawlers, particularly contemporaries like Atlus' *Devil Summoner*, seem boring by comparison, even if the mechanics are less complex. Combine all this with a fantastic soundtrack by Motoi Sakuraba and a slightly darker version of the charming fairytale world found in other *Shining* games, and it's one of the better console dungeon crawlers out there.



SEGA SATURN
Shining the Holy Ark

First-person dungeon crawlers were seen as antiquated in 1996, but *Shining the Holy Ark* remains fun and flashy.



Etrian Odyssey (series)

Developer: Atlus/Lancarse | Released: 2007 | Platform(s): DS, 3DS

First-person dungeon crawlers were some of the first RPGs published in the '80s, but their popularity waned through the '90s, and all but disappeared into the 2000s – *Shin Megami Tensei* transitioned away from them completely for its PlayStation 2 instalments, and the *Wizardry* games and assorted offshoots were targetted at dwindling niche audiences. But in 2007, Atlus almost single-handedly rejuvenated the crawler with the *Etrian Odyssey* series on the Nintendo DS, updating the age-old sub-genre for a modern audience. The first game in the series was helmed by Kazuya Niinou, who had worked on Atlus' *Trauma Center* series, though he left fairly early on to join RPG developer Imageepoch.

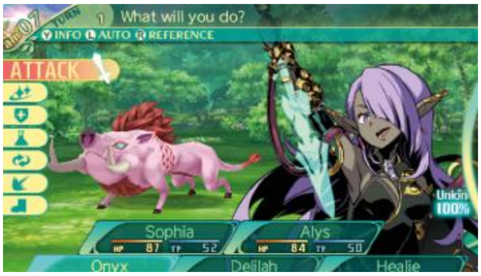
There are a number of reasons for *Etrian Odyssey*'s success. *Wizardry* was an American game, so many of its entries used Western-style fantasy artwork. *Etrian Odyssey* instead uses manga-style character illustrations, provided by artist Yuji Himukai. There's a wide assortment of characters, male and female, super-masculine and hyper-cutesy, that take on the roles of standard RPG character classes.

It also takes the dungeon out of dungeon crawling, by putting you in a variety of colourful environments. The grid-based layouts are the same, but the diverse locales are in stark contrast to the dingy caverns that previously typified the sub-genre. In Japan the series is called *Sekaiju no Meikyuu* ("Labyrinth of the World Tree"), where the "World Tree" is Yggdrasil from Norse mythology. But since Atlus published the GBA RPG *Yggdra Union* around the same time, it used another name for the English title, from the town of Etria, in which the game is set. The title change is unfortunate because it fails to represent the lush, foresty feel in each of the games' opening areas.

The series is also specifically developed for the dual-screen layout of the DS. A big part of the appeal of the old dungeon crawlers was mapping their layouts, which basically required graph paper. Unfortunately, this was always going to be pretty clumsy, and not exactly suitable for portable play. Leaving that behind, *Etrian Odyssey* uses the bottom screen as a map that you can make yourself, with the stylus. The game automatically keeps track of where you step, but it's up to you to draw in walls, doors, treasures, and other important elements. It really gives a small thrill of satisfaction to chart your progress step-by-step, though later entries offer automatic mapping if you'd prefer not to deal with it.

At the outset of each adventure, you enter a town, create your characters based on an assortment of classes, and then meet with the local guild to get some quests. The town acts as a home base where you can rest, buy and sell equipment, and look for sub-quests between your dives into the labyrinth. Though the particulars vary between entries, the single main dungeon is divided into strata, typically consisting of four or so floors. You can skip between them after they're conquered, though you can also unlock shortcuts to make retreading old ground much faster.

Atlus took a chance, reviving the old school dungeon crawler with *Etrian Odyssey*, and it paid off, with a total of eight games in the franchise plus the *Persona Q* spinoffs.



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Etrian Odyssey
NEXUS
ATLUS
NINTENDO 3DS

***Etrian Odyssey Nexus* can be considered a "best of" compilation of previous classes and dungeons from the series, and makes a good entry point, despite technically being the final game (for the moment).**

The combat system is a pretty typical turn-based affair, but owing to the large number of character classes and techniques, there's an astounding amount of depth. Beyond the usual fighter, magic-user and healer type characters, there's a large emphasis on various buffs and debuffs, defensive skills, and binding attacks that can disable various body parts and thus decrease enemy effectiveness. Upon gaining a level, you also get a set amount of SP, which is used to upgrade various stats or skills. The flexibility is extraordinary.

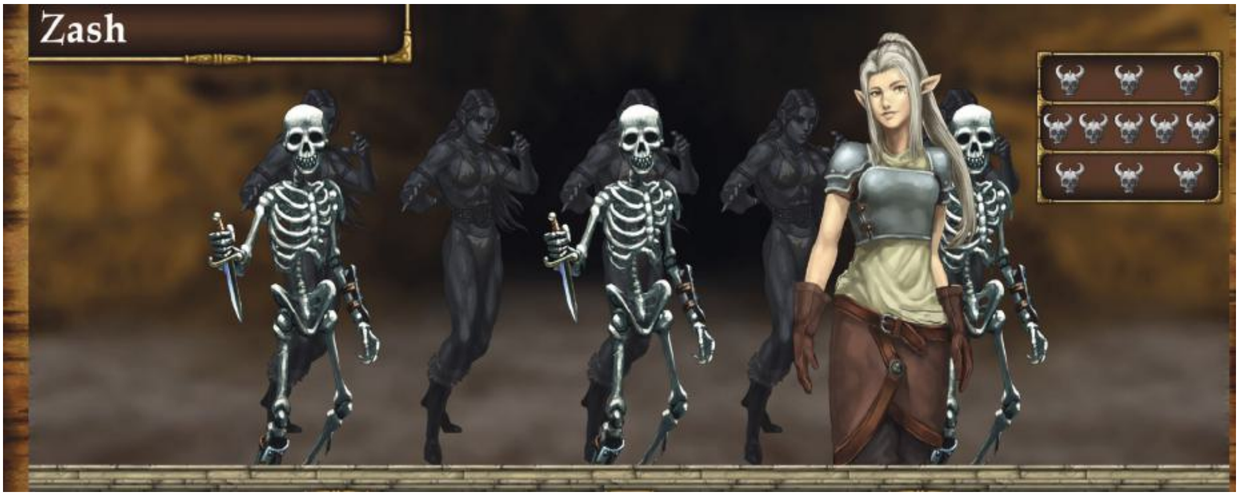
As in many older RPGs, since the characters you create are completely your own, there's not much of an emphasis on story. That isn't to say that there's no plot, as you'll come across various NPCs at regular intervals, all exploring the labyrinth for their own reasons, but they're pretty sparse. Unique to *Etrian Odyssey* are monsters called FOEs ("Field On Enemy" in Japanese, "Formido Oppugnatura Exsequens" in the English version). While most enemy encounters are random, these incredibly powerful foes are visible when you're dungeon crawling. Each has its own behaviour – some simply move in patterns, others will chase after you if they see you. And you generally don't want to fight them, at least at first, because they're monumentally overwhelming. Instead, the challenge is figuring out a way to avoid them without getting caught. Then, when you've grown more powerful, you can revisit them and give them a proper smashing.

There are a total of eight games in the main *Etrian Odyssey* series, not counting similar games by Atlus like *Persona Q* and *Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey*, or the two *Mystery Dungeon* spinoffs, or their spiritual offshoot *7th Dragon*, produced by SEGA. The series began with three entries on the DS, which use 3D graphics for the dungeons and static 2D sprites for everything else. The music is by Yuzo Koshiro, who provides a retro-style vibe, using FM-synth music, that sounds almost like it came directly from a PC88 soundboard. Most of these games are pretty similar.

The fourth and fifth games were produced for the 3DS, which enables a visual upgrade, including polygonal animated monsters and cleaner graphics all round. The music has been redone with live instruments, and all sounds gorgeous, though certain entries offer alternate FM tracks. *Etrian Odyssey IV* breaks the formula a bit by presenting an overworld you can explore in an airship, with many smaller dungeons instead of one large one. *Etrian Odyssey V* returns to the single big dungeon, but adds in assorted races (including bunny humans and dark elves).

Between the fourth and fifth games, there were two games in the *Untold* sub-series. These are remakes of the first two DS *Etrian Odyssey* games, each including a brand new story mode for those who prefer games with beefier narratives. To appeal to a wider audience, these games also introduce various quality-of-life improvements that make the games less difficult.

The final game, *Etrian Odyssey Nexus*, is a celebration game, including a selection of classes and dungeons from nearly all of the games (except for the fifth one), compiled together with a new story. As such, there's an extraordinary amount of content. The series is pretty samey, since they were released on an almost yearly basis, and it's easy to burn out on them, so this single-game "best of" acts as a good starting point.



Elminage (series)

Developer: Starfish | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): PS2, PSP, DS, WIN, 3DS

Along with *Etrian Odyssey*, *Elminage* was at the forefront of the Japanese first-person dungeon crawlers of the 2000s. Created by Daisuke Komiyama, who helmed the games through the first two instalments, and published by Starfish, they are typical of *Wizardry*-style games, but feature quite a number of unique gimmicks, as well as unparalleled customisability.

The first game, *Elminage: Priestess of Darkness and the Ring of the Gods*, didn't introduce any particularly outstanding new gameplay elements, but was notable for its diverse, well-illustrated monsters and items. However, the initial PS2 version was plagued by extraordinarily long load times, among a host of other issues. The Nintendo DS re-release, in November 2008, eliminated these and dramatically improved the balance. This re-release became known as the "Miracle of Starfish" and saved the series from death. The game was later re-released as *Elminage Original* for the PSP and Windows, which received an English translation along with higher resolution graphics.

The sequel, *Elminage II: Sousei no Megami to Unmei no Daichi* ("Twin Goddess and the Land of Destiny"), released on the PSP the following year, introduced a Marriage System that allows party members and contracted monsters to create children, who can inherit skills that are unattainable otherwise. The Face Load feature allows players customise their party using their own uploaded portraits. A DS revision was released in 2010, with new monsters, items, and events, plus additional item graphics.

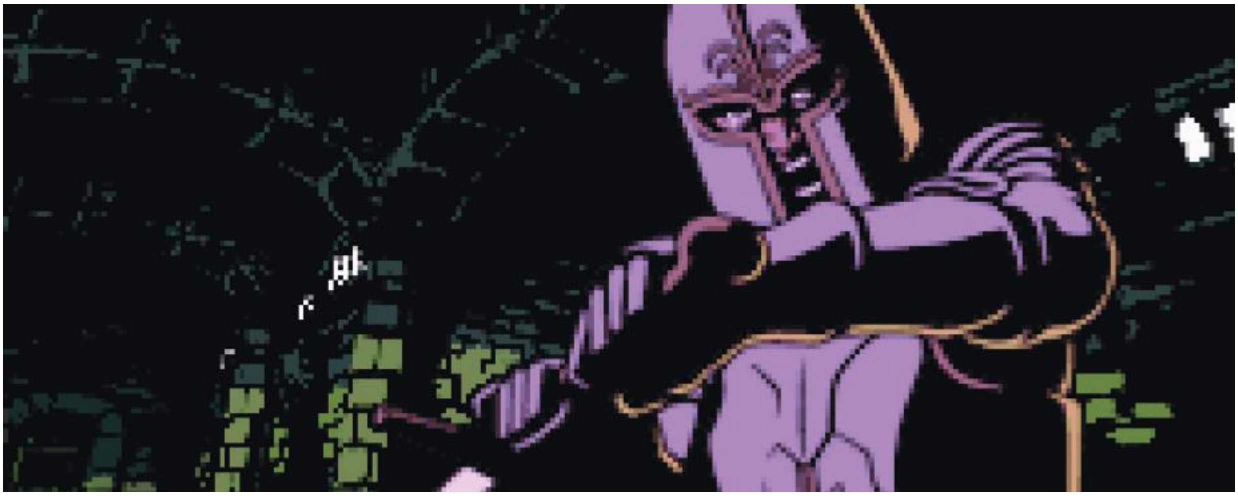
Elminage III: Ankoku no Shito to Taiyou no Kyuuden ("The Dark Apostle and the Palace of the Sun") was released for the PSP in 2011, adding day/night and weather cycles that had actual impacts on gameplay, in terms of dungeon availability, spell strength, and monsters spawned. The game also introduced additional graphics and custom BGM loading; plus a dungeon-sharing function: the game can generate a random dungeon for players to name and insert their party as a boss fight. A 3DS version was released in 2017, which included balance adjustments and some new events.

Starfish released two *Elminage* spinoffs in 2012 for the PSP: *Elminage: Gothic* and *Elminage Ibun: Ame no Mihashira* ("Pillar of Heaven"). *Elminage: Gothic* retains the same basic gameplay and customisation of the earlier titles, but has a darker, "gothic" story and setting. Combat difficulty and dungeon complexity are increased, with party wipes much more likely. Auto-mapping, previously free, is now a consumable item. In a game with very limited inventory capacity, such maps take up valuable equipment or healing item slots. The game was later ported to 3DS and Windows, getting an English translation and higher resolution graphics.

Elminage Ibun: Ame no Mihashira departed from the *Elminage* formula and embraced a style aimed at a more casual audience, with anime-style visuals. The story is more detailed than in previous titles, revolving around mysterious occurrences at a modern-day Japanese high school. Character creation has been eliminated in favour of a pre-made party. Combat is very easy, leading many players to call it a boring beginner's game. The player can capture youkai encountered in battle, forming a separate party. However, the spirits cannot be customised or combined, causing youkai to be too weak to be of value. The game was later ported to the 3DS in 2014, with some added events and some optimisations, but the changes have their own issues, causing frustration amongst players.

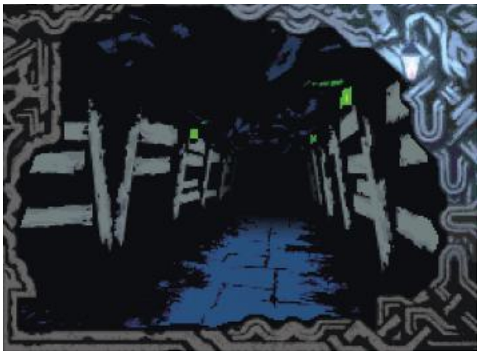
Elminage
ORIGINAL

The *Elminage* series is aimed at fans of classic *Wizardry* games, so its art style eschews the anime style of most other modern DRPGs. The exception is the last game in the series, which went that route to capture a wider audience.



The Dark Spire

Developer: Success | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS



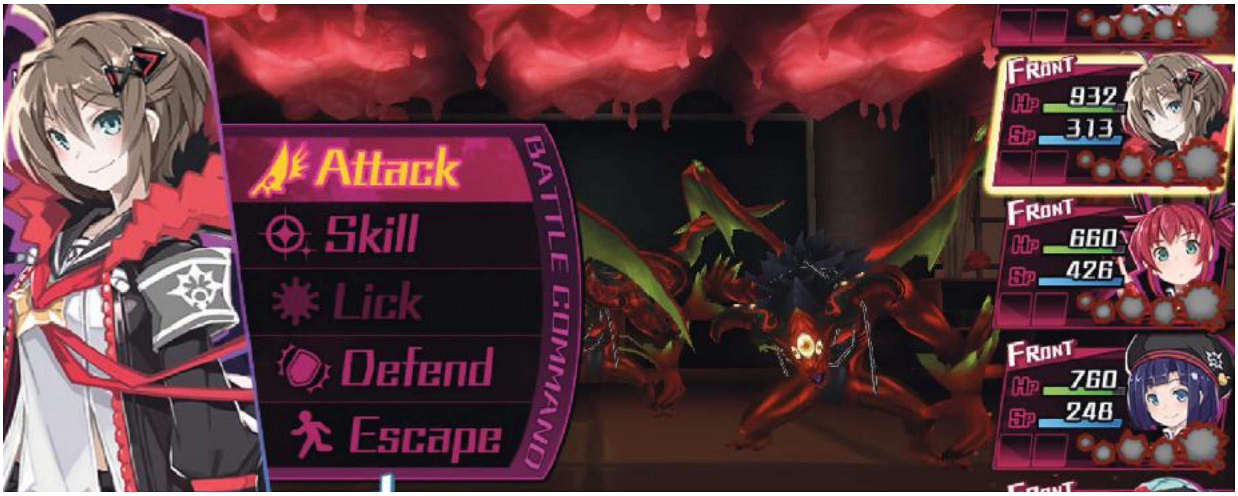
NINTENDO DS
THE DARK SPIRE
ATLUS

The unique visual style of *The Dark Spire* – bright colours contrasted with blackness – make it stand out against other dungeon crawlers produced both before and since.

Much like *Elminage,* Success' *The Dark Spire* is unapologetically for the old-school *Wizardry* fan. That means that rather than several brightly coloured dungeons, there's just the one massive tower, with eight floors, a training area, and a basement. Each floor is packed, though, and both substantial exploration and plenty of grinding are required to build up a party strong enough to make it through. There are four character classes at the outset (Warrior, Thief, Mage, and Priest), with advanced classes opening up later on (Samurai, Ranger, Paladin, Wizard, and Druid), plus you can set their race (Human, Dwarf, Elf, and Halfling) and alignment. It's also one of the few modern dungeon crawlers to bring back the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* Armour Class stat and with it, THAC0 ("To Hit Armour Class 0"). This determines the probability of successful hits, with lower numbers having a better chance of producing damage; this can result in fights in which one (or both) sides may spend several turns attacking without actually making an impact. The only concession to modernity is an automap on the bottom DS screen, though even that just shows the layout of the dungeon, not your party's location. The puzzles can also be extremely obscure.

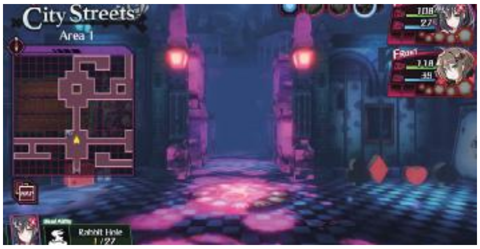
What it does have is an incredible sense of style. The developers of *The Dark Spire* clearly had more of a thing for Western fantasy than anime, but at the same time, gave the visuals their own unique identity. The dungeon hallways are a blend of black and single bright colours like green, orange or red. The enemies aren't animated, but rather presented in full screen illustrations that seem right out of an RPG rulebook. Accompanying this is an incredible soundtrack – Kenichi Arakawa isn't exactly a well-known name among video game composers, but he did incredible work here, utilising both distorted guitars and chorales to create perfect exploration and dungeon themes. The Classic mode changes the dungeon display to simple wireframes, as in the original Apple II *Wizardry* games, and makes the enemy into tiny sprites, as well as changing the music to a NES-style soundtrack. There are also plenty of references to classic RPGs and fantasy (and even *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*), though some of these were lost in the localisation (in one instance, a password was supposed to be a reference to the classic "TREBOR SUX" phrase from the older *Wizardry* games).

Gamers who were introduced to 3D dungeon crawlers by *Etrian Odyssey* might find themselves out of their depths with *The Dark Spire,* as it's really for hardcore players who want to revisit the '80s, though its aesthetics make it worth at least a tour. Unlike *Elminage,* it never received any iterations or developed much of a fanbase, though it did have the luxury of receiving a North American localisation, courtesy of Atlus, seeking to pad out its dungeon crawler library before the *Etrian Odyssey* sequel was released.



Mary Skelter (series)

Developer: Compile Heart | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PSV, WIN, NSW, PS4



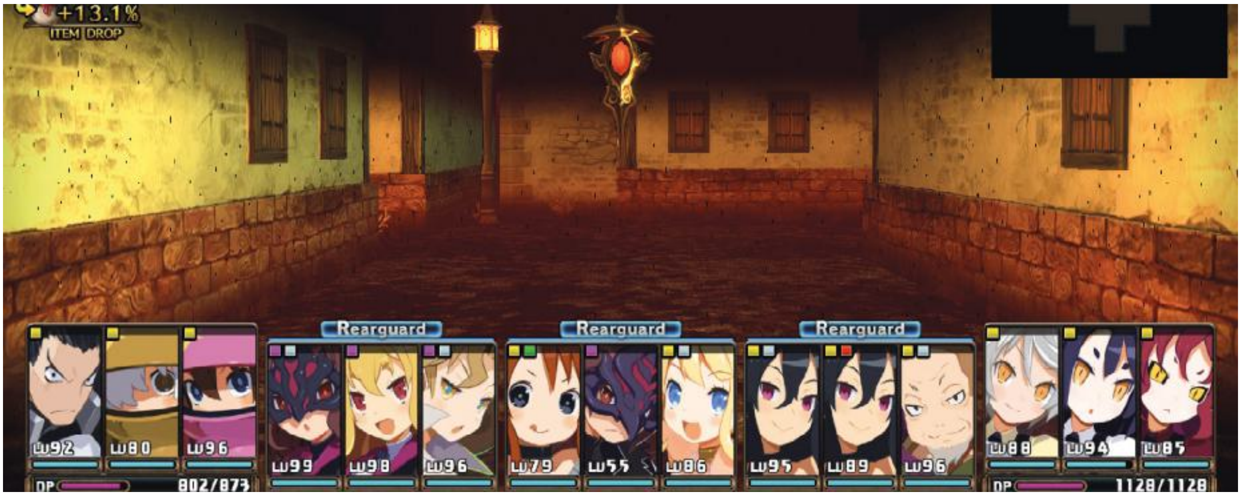
PS VITA
Mary Skelter

***Mary Skelter* is still very much a Compile Heart game, but the company has made a concerted effort to improve its games while still maintaining its signature bawdiness.**

Compile Heart began dabbling in first-person dungeon crawlers with games like *Moe Chronicle* and *MeiQ: Labyrinth of Death*, which were bad-to-mediocre efforts filled with cutesy girls. Their *Mary Skelter* series, though, is a bit more ambitious. The setting is a major city in Japan that has been consumed by a living prison called the Jail, which torments its denizens with monstrosities called Marchens. Most of the cast consists of reimagined girls from assorted public domain stories and fairy tales, both Western and Eastern. The main heroine, is Alice (of Lewis Carroll's stories), but other characters include Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Thumbelina, Gretel, and Hameln. The sole male character is Jack (of the beanstalk), though in the first game, he can't do much in combat. In the second, he's morphed into a monster and shares turns with that game's heroine Otsu, herself taken from the Japanese tale *Crane's Return of a Favour*. Obviously, these designs are based only loosely on their originals, so most of the ladies are typical harem stereotypes.

The dungeon is filled with more traps, pits and gimmicks than the usual DRPG. Since it's technically alive, it also has three characteristics – hunger, libido, and sleep – which sometimes trigger roulettes that can provide bonuses or open up new areas. Similar to *Etrian Odyssey*'s FOEs, there are also certain powerful Nightmare creatures that you need to run away from, though they can disable the automap, so that's not easy. During combat, if you exploit an enemy weakness or finish them with a powerful attack, then blood will splatter on the heroine. When she's obtained enough blood, she can enter a powerful Genocide mode which lets them use more powerful abilities. However, she may also enter Blood Skelter mode, which will strip them of most of their clothes (this is a Compile Heart game, after all) but sends them into an uncontrollable rage. Additionally, one character can lick blood off another, which resets that character's blood counter but grants some kind of bonus based on who's doing the licking. (This isn't actually shown, just represented through text and sounds.) Each character can be assigned one of a variety of classes to enhance their skills, plus equipment can be upgraded, using blood crystals dropped by enemies. There's quite a lot of depth to these systems, helping set the game apart from the usual DRPG, though the randomness, particularly when it comes to the Jail's emotions and the appearance of merchants, tends to be frustrating.

The second game is similar to the first, offering a few new characters, like the Little Mermaid. It lets you cultivate blood farms in the dungeons, and has optional restrictions to make the game harder but with higher rewards. It also includes an unlockable remake of the first game that fixes some issues. In particular, many dungeons were just needlessly large and complicated. It also adds an extra dungeon that ties everything together. Altogether, the dark setting and story, and interesting mechanics, elevate it above some of the other DRPGs out there, even though it still has some of the clunkiness and sleaziness typical of Compile Heart.



Labyrinth of Refrain: Coven of Dusk

Developer: Nippon Ichi | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): PSV, PS4, NSW, WIN

Nippon Ichi is largely known for strategy RPGs like *Disgaea*. *Labyrinth of Refrain: Coven of Dusk* may be their first dungeon crawler, but you'd never know from its polished graphics, excellent soundtrack, and intricate character and combat systems. Tatsuya Izumi's dark comedy storyline is much more developed than your average dungeon crawler's tale, which could frustrate fans of the classic formula. The game's story centres on Dusk Witch Dronya and her assistant, Luca, who go to the town of Refrain to explore an underground labyrinth. Since the labyrinth is toxic to humans, the duo sends puppets to explore it. Dronya possesses the Tractatus de Monstrum, a.k.a. Tractie, a magical book that can hold a person's soul. The player controls Tractie, which, in turn, controls the puppets.

Labyrinth of Refrain takes the familiar dungeon crawler formula and adds new exploration mechanics, deep character customisation, and fresh combat mechanics. There are nine dungeons to explore, each with a distinct feel. One dungeon makes the party the size of giants, while another has them collaborating with a ghost in purgatory. Exploration revolves around a limited resource called Reinforcement. This allows the party to break down walls, hide from enemies, and escape the dungeon. While exploring, the party gathers a currency called Mana. As the party's Mana increases, rare loot drop rates go up too. However, if the party gets too much Mana, ultra-hard enemies appear, which can wipe out a party very quickly. Balancing the use of Reinforcement and gathering of Mana plays a large part in the gameplay loop.

The party is divided into five Covens, with up to three active puppets each. Each Coven uses a Pact, which supplies specific spells/skills and stat bonuses/penalties. For example, some Pacts are tailored for healing and others for strong defensive/evasion skills. Class strengths and Pacts provide a lot of options for party customisation and play styles.

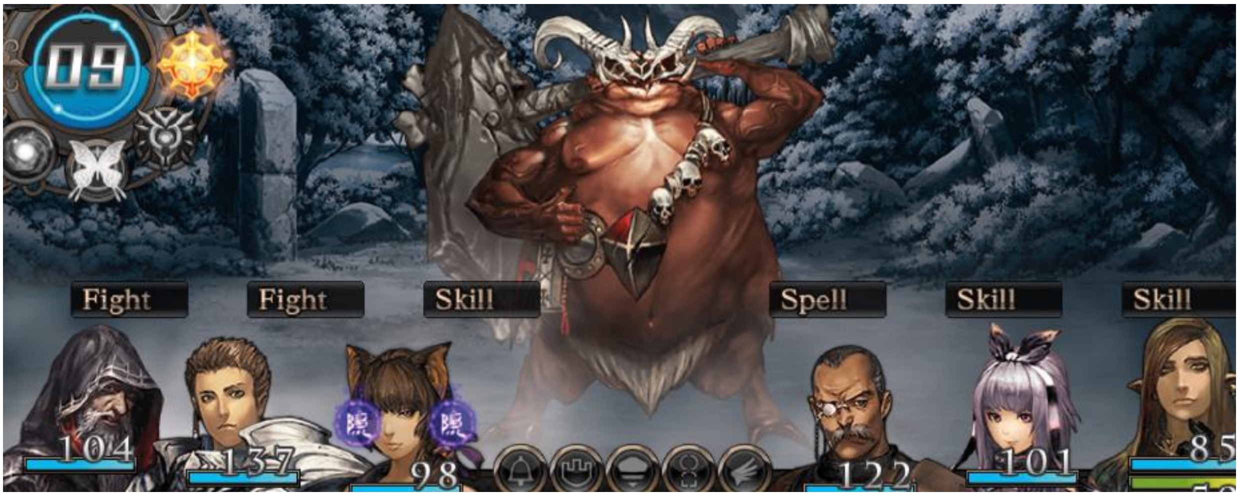
Puppet can have one of eight classes. The typical prototypes are here: Tanks, Mages, Archers, Paper-tigers, and Fighters. Puppets have a Nature which affects their initial stats and their rapport with other puppets in their Coven. Other customisation options, such as combat stance, strong hand, and stat growth curves have substantial impacts. Choosing a lucky number (tip: choose an even number) and nickname are fun additions to flesh out the puppets.

Combat rewards chaining physical or magic attacks with damage multipliers and increased loot. The party can also assume different Formations, with each Coven taking a front or back row position. Formations provide stat boosts, auto-healing, or better odds of escaping. Strong attacks, called Critical Gore, break the body parts of party members or enemies, limiting their max HP and combat options until repaired. By spending Reinforcement, the player can stockpile battle experience, risking total loss on a party wipe, but getting a good bonus when cashing in. Loot has various rarities and qualifiers that give items their individuality. Synthesis allows the player to upgrade weapons and armour for even more customisation.

It certainly looks and feels like a Nippon Ichi game. Takehito Harada's character designs received high praise, as did the lush dungeon graphics and enemy designs. Tenpei Sato's soundtrack was regarded by some as his strongest effort in recent years. All in all, it's an excellent title, and it was well received by genre fans.

PS4
Labyrinth of Refrain

***Labyrinth of Refrain* can be described succinctly as a first-person dungeon crawler made by the *Disgaea* people.**



Stranger of Sword City

Developer: Experience | Released: 2014 | Platform(s): WIN, X360, PSV, NSW

Experience is a prolific Japanese dungeon crawler developer, releasing over ten separate games in the genre between 2008 and 2018, including *Demon Gaze, Generation Xth, Operation Abyss,* and *Ray Gigant*. *Stranger of Sword City,* probably their best game, was originally released in 2014, and an enhanced PS Vita version, *Stranger of Sword City Revisited,* came out in 2016. *Revisited* makes a number of improvements, including three new character classes, three new dungeons, and optional battle challenges for the game's mini-bosses, called Lineages.

The game opens with the player a castaway in a land known as Escario, after their plane disappears. The player meets other people also stranded there, and the well-illustrated backgrounds show the causes: crashed planes and a grounded cruise ship. Soon after arriving, the player learns of the ability to extract Blood Crystals from powerful enemies called Lineages. Each Blood Crystal can be given to one of three Vessel characters, in exchange for different, powerful combat abilities known as Divine Skills. By exploring labyrinths, defeating Lineages, and giving Blood Crystals to Vessels, the inhabitants hope to find a way to return home. The game offers three endings, one for each Vessel, and the player's Blood Crystal distribution choices determine which is played out.

The game features a permadeath mechanic. With the exception of the main character, each party member has Life Points, as in some of the *SaGa* games. These indicate the number of times a character can die before becoming unusable. Typically the maximum is between one and three, initially depending on the character's age. There are ways to restore these Life Points, but they are time consuming or very expensive. This mechanic increases the risk in dungeons, while encouraging experimentation with different classes while characters heal.

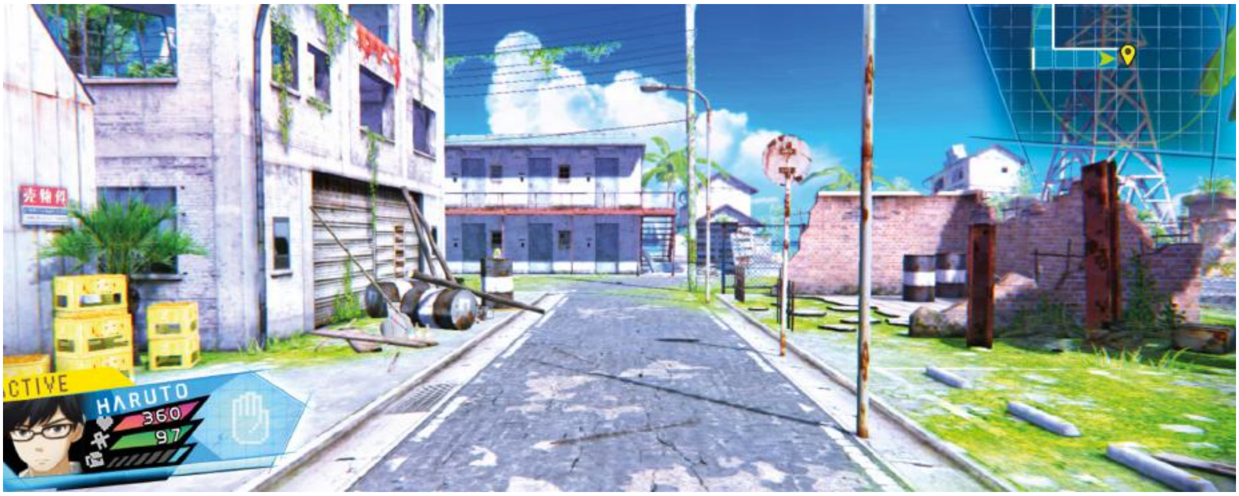
Character creation offers a number of options: age, five races, seven talents, and element classes. Age affects Life Points; race affects initial character statistics; and talents provide passive skills such as disarming traps and noticing labyrinth secrets. The classes include the usual suspects: Samurai, Ninja, Mage, Cleric, etc., and the option to change classes later. *Revisited* adds three new classes, with the Clocker being one of the most interesting. The Clocker can speed up time to ensure they take the first action, perfect for healing: and can also slow enemies, ensuring they attack last, allowing the party to set up defensive countermeasures.

The game's combat is well balanced, and offers an interesting mechanic known as Hiding. In certain areas of a dungeon, the party can Hide and attack Transporter enemies carrying high-value loot. These battles typically include higher-level enemies and powerful variant enemies. Hiding can also result in battles with Lineages, the fearsome mini-bosses mentioned earlier. *Revisited* adds the ability to reduce the party's level, limiting hit points and skills during these Lineage battles. Winning these Slaying Challenges provides even better loot.

Motoya Ataka's dungeon crawler design experience really shines here. The balance is very good, the classes are interesting (especially with strategic class change options), and the artwork is excellent. As with many Experience games, there are some reused assets, and the music certainly sounds similar to that in *Demon Gaze,* offering orchestral scores and optional vocaloid accompaniment.

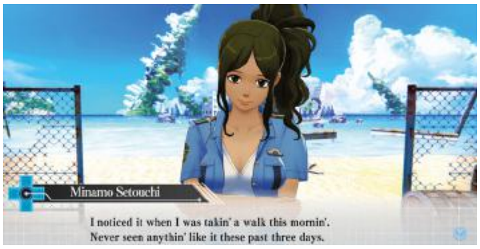
Stranger of Sword City
Revisited

Experience has developed quite a number of DRPGs, most initially released on the Vita, though *Stranger in Sword City* is one of the better ones.



Zanki Zero: Last Beginning

Developer: Spike-Chunsoft/Lancarse | Released: 2018 | Platform(s): PS4, PSV, WIN



Minamo Setouchi

I noticed it when I was takin' a walk this mornin'.
Never seen anythin' like it these past three days.

***Zanki Zero* is similar to *Danganronpa*, but re-imagined as a dungeon crawler instead of a mystery adventure.**

The world has ended, and the last remnant of humanity is eight people gathered on the deserted, destroyed Garage Island. Their original bodies have died, but their souls live on in the form of clones with brief life spans. By exploring the ruins, they seek to understand their purpose, and learn about their lives before the apocalypse.

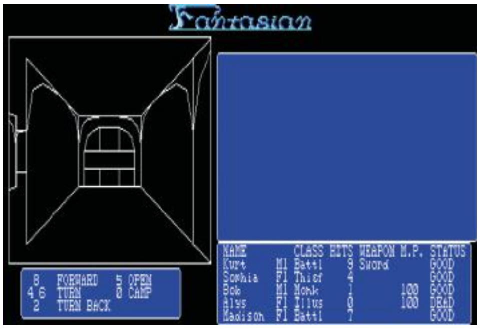
Zanki Zero was created by some of the members of Spike-Chunsoft's *Danganronpa* series, including producer Yoshinori Terasawa and designer Takayuki Sugawara, so it bears many of their trademarks. It involves an isolated situation, and a cast of characters with exaggerated, unique personalities, here based on the seven deadly sins. Chipper police officer Minamo Setouchi suffers the sin of pride; chubby corporate heiress Yuma Mashiro shows evidence of gluttony, while the cutesy florist Rinko Susukino bathes in lust. Most curious is Sachika Hirasaka, a young girl with artificial limbs, who isn't affiliated with any of the seven deadly sins and doesn't grow older like the others. The story balances a sense of despair with a curious sense of humour, as instructions are relayed via videotapes of a '50s-style cartoon starring a young boy and a talking lamb, and it also has an odd obsession with retro arcade games. However, while *Danganronpa* was a mystery adventure game similar to Capcom's *Ace Attorney* series, *Zanki Zero* is a dungeon crawler. It was actually co-developed by Lancarse, the team behind Atlus' *Etrian Odyssey* series.

But it's different again, being less like *Wizardry* and more like *Dungeon Master*. Combat occurs in real time, as you explore beaches, abandoned office buildings, and other locales, with four people acting simultaneously. There's a heavy emphasis on survival, due to constantly dwindling stats and resources – you need to keep your stamina high and stress low by eating or drinking, as well as regularly finding a toilet for your characters to use. Certain characters have preferred foods or allergies that can also affect these stats. A further complication is that the clones only have a life span of 13 days – as you move between dungeon floors, they will age, from childhood through middle age to old age, each with differing stats and abilities. Since death is unavoidable, anyone can be resurrected so long as you have enough points, obtained by killing enemies and completing goals. Dying under the right circumstances will also provide bonuses to strengthen the clone in their next life. As with *Danganronpa*, the characters have different affection ratings towards each other, with various bonus scenes appearing depending on these.

Juggling all of the items necessarily to keep your character healthy, as well as monitoring their constantly dwindling stats, proves to be quite stressful. Combat is also clumsy, and enemies are extremely powerful. The story is pretty good, and the lowest difficulty makes it easy enough that adventure game fans don't really have to worry about the RPG aspects, but at that point, it just feels long and boring. Still, as an eccentric little game, there's nothing else out there quite like *Zanki Zero*.

Fantasian

Developer: XtalSoft | Released: 1985 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, X1



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NAME          CLASS HITS WEAPON M.P. STATUS
Kurt     M1 Battl    9 Sword          GOOD
Sophia   F1 Thief    4                GOOD
Bob      M1 Monk     1           100  GOOD
Alys     F1 Illus    0           100  DEAD
Madison  F1 Battl    7                GOOD
```

***Fantasian* is the inverse of *Mugen no Shinzou*, offering *Wizardry* dungeons with *Ultima* combat.**

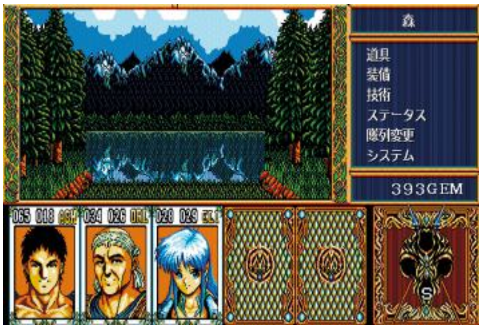
On the early Japanese RPG scene, XtalSoft's *Mugen no Shinzou* series is well known for combining the exploration of *Ultima* with the combat of *Wizardry*, a formula that was also used by Enix's *Dragon Quest* series with remarkable success. One of XtalSoft's other series, *Fantasian*, is the inverse: it's a *Wizardry* clone that uses *Ultima*-style combat, particularly the type introduced in the third game.

The other aspect *Fantasian* is known for is its robust character creation system. Attempting to mimic pen-and-paper RPGs as closely as possible, you can pick from one of seven races – Human, Half-Orc, Half-Elf, Elf, Dwarf, Halfling, and Gnome – and then pick their gender. After allocating bonus points to each of the stats, there are then four classes: Warrior, Thief, Monk, and Illusionist, though certain races are better suited to certain classes. You can also upgrade their classes, if you find an item called the Ring of Gald, similar to the Rat Tail from the original *Final Fantasy*. Promoted classes include Battler, Robber, Clergy, and Magician. Some are restricted based on gender or race – for example, you can make a female Monk, but she cannot be promoted to Clergy. The ultimate goal is to conquer all five floors and defeat the demon king, Billades.

There was also a sequel called *Advanced Fantasian: Quest for the Lost Sanctuary*. It retains the basics and expands on pretty much everything, providing a much stronger storyline, exploration and story scenes that take place outside of the dungeons, vastly improved graphics, actual music, and a more complex magic system.

Dinosaur

Developer: Falcom | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, FMT, WIN



DINOSAUR
ダイナソア

There are no dinosaurs in *Dinosaur*, a dungeon crawler from Falcom.

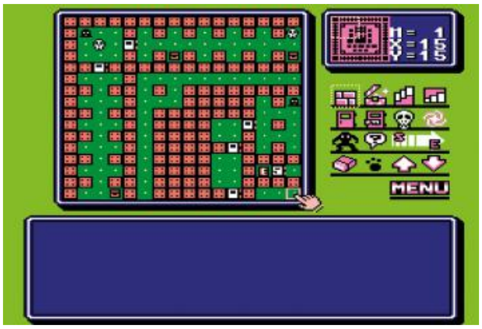
Despite specialising in RPGs, Falcom didn't really produce much in the way of first-person dungeon crawlers, except for *Dinosaur*. It's also rather unusual for the company in that it's dark fantasy, a change from the more colourful fare they were generally known for. Despite the name, it has nothing to do with any prehistoric setting; Dinosaur is just the name of the final boss. The story focuses on a group of people summoned by a white butterfly to the land of Zamhan for mysterious reasons; the hero is a legendary mercenary named Ash. The plot focuses on the cast's sins rather than the usual "save the world" story, and the game is well regarded for its writing, particularly the devil-worshipping priest Ruon. There are two scenarios, the second of which is more difficult than the main story.

All of the characters are set in their classes, but once their stats reach high enough levels, they can become apprentices and learn skills from stronger characters. Battles are straightforward, with friends and foes displayed as cards. The random encounter rate is very high, but at least each fight is over quickly. Like Falcom's *Brandish*, you can also rest at any point while exploring, to recharge health, but there's a chance you'll be surprised by enemies and get shellacked.

Designed and programmed by Kazunari Tomi, who previously created the *Mugen no Shinzou* series and later conceived the *Lunar* series, it's a minor RPG classic. While Tomi left Falcom after this game, it was later remade for Windows under the name *Dinosaur Resurrection*, which completely overhauled the visuals and tuned aspects like the random encounter rate.

Dungeon Kid

Developer: Pixel/Quest | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): FC



Dungeon KiD

Dungeon Kid lets players create and play their own first-person dungeon crawler. While certain aspects are set in stone, there's quite a bit of customisation – you can create opening and ending messages, change the dialogue of the townspeople, create map layouts, name and adjust enemy stats, and create various types of items and magic. You can't directly change the graphics – that may have been too complex for a mere Famicom game – instead using a selection of tiles. You can, however, choose between fantasy and science fiction themes. There are other limitations, such as a maximum of eight floors. It's one of the handful of Famicom games that supports the Turbo File storage drive, though your creations can be saved on the cartridge as well.

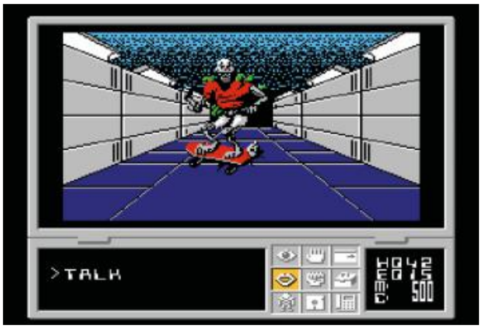
The game itself is pretty basic. You can have three characters in your party, chosen from 12 different classes. The turn-based battles are displayed from an overhead perspective, in which friends and foes appear as small sprites. There's a sample game included, called *Kojou no Mahoutsukai* ("The Magician of the Ancient Castle") but it's really just there to give you an example of how you can create your own game. Indeed, your creations are likely to be experiments, or for friends to play, rather than games for yourself. Visually, it's a little more colourful than the average Famicom dungeon crawler, as it's meant for a younger audience, and the soundtrack by Masaharu Iwata is absolutely fantastic.

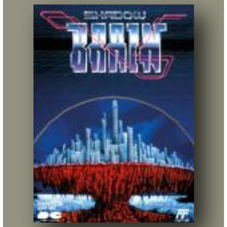
Dungeon Kid is a treasure, since there aren't really any other "make your own game" titles on the Famicom. It also paved the way for the *RPG Maker* series that originated on PC platforms before eventually making its way onto consoles.

There really wasn't any "make your own game" software for the Famicom at the time, so *Dungeon Kid* is particularly trail-blazing.

Shadow Brain

Developer: Scitron & Art/Brain Busters | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): FC





Shadow Brain calls itself the first "virtual reality RPG" for the Famicom, and boy, is it ambitious. The story begins in the year 1990, as genius child programmer Jun and his father are transported 100 years into the future, to a city called Lemuria. During the time travel, Jun's dad seems to have disappeared, so Jun begins to explore the 16 sections of the city, where robots, cyborgs, and humans attempt to share the space, and the streets are overrun with mutants. He's guided by a woman in cyberspace, who will lead him up against an evil program named Gaider.

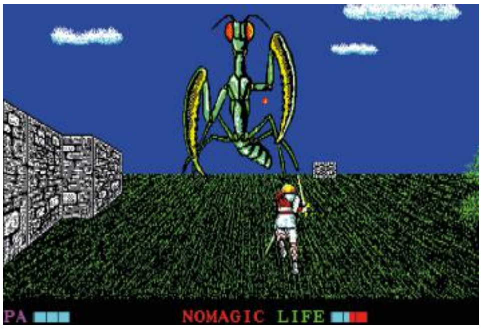
The game package includes a VHS tape, which explains the story using a voiceover and illustrated stills. Some big talents of the era were behind the game, with the main theme provided by the band The Alfee, and Gaider's design by surrealist Screaming Mad George. The production values are pretty high, so it's a shame that much of the game is rather basic and repetitive. Jun is the only playable character, fights are one-on-one, and other than finding new programs for his Virtual Data Sensor, there's not much character customisation. It is player-friendly though, with an on-screen map and the option to back away from enemies instead of fighting them.

Still, this is one damn cool-looking game. It has a fascinating retro-futuristic-cyberpunk style that's both colourful and weird, especially in some of the strange characters you'll come across. There's an in-game BBS the player can access to chat with people or buy stuff, which was ahead of its time; the '90s proliferation of the internet did indeed follow. Definitely a case of style over substance, but the style is remarkable.

Multimedia crossovers like *Shadow Brain* were novel, but not unheard of, in the Famicom era.

Argo

Developer: Kuro Software Koubou | Released: 1986 | Platform(s): PC88, FM7, PC98, X1



Three dimension adventure
ARGO

The gigantic boss monsters and accompanying 3D action sequences make *Argo* stand out from the crowd.

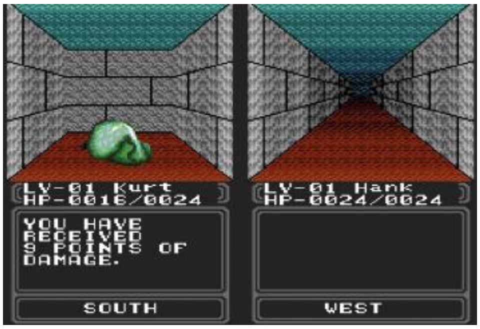
Argo is based loosely on the Grecian tale of *Jason and the Argonauts*, and has the hero Iason protecting his village of Iolkos from monsters. It was developed by Kure Software Koubou, later of the action-strategy RPG *Silver Ghost*.

Compared to other first-person RPGs of the time, *Argo* is relatively user-friendly. Whenever you happen onto someone, you're given the option to fight or chat; obviously chatting with bears or thieves won't accomplish much, but you don't want to be beating up shepherds either. An on-screen map makes things easy to navigate, and enemies have health bars visible during combat, though it's a little difficult to find the mage's house where you can rest and replenish your strength. You only ever control a single character, so the turn-based fighting is more a matter of just hacking away at enemies, though you also need to keep your food supply up so you don't go hungry. The game is fairly open-ended, as you explore for specific items, compared to the floor-based dungeons in other first-person RPGs.

However, the coolest part of *Argo* kicks in whenever you happen upon a large boss monster. These creatures pop up over the horizon and take up most of it – combat switches to an action-based system whereby you control Iason directly as he runs back and forth across the screen, dodging the boss's attacks while dashing forward to slice it up or fire magic. You can even zoom into the sky to fight with flying monsters. In other words, it's all a bit like *Space Harrier*, except you have a sword and the screen doesn't actually scroll. While the animation is pretty flickery, it still looks incredible for a PC game from 1986.

Double Dungeons

Developer: NCS/Masaya | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): TG16


LV-01 Kurt
HP-0016/0024
YOU HAVE RECEIVED 5 POINTS OF DAMAGE.
SOUTH

LV-01 Hank
HP-0024/0024
WEST

DOUBLE DUNGEONS

***Double Dungeons* is a little simple, but it's not like there's much else out there in the way of co-op dungeon crawlers.**

Role-playing games are typically thought of as single player affairs, but that's something Masaya tried to change with *Double Dungeons*, a unique first-person dungeon crawler for the TurboGrafx-16. The screen is split down the middle, one side for each player. The pacing is pretty fast, as combat largely boils down to running up against an enemy and attacking them over and over. When you gain enough experience points, you'll level up, plus money can be used to rest at the inn or purchase stuff from the shop, providing you can find them. In addition to weapons and armour, there's also attack magic to find, and since there's no MP, you can use it with abandon. Death will plop you back to the beginning of the stage and drain you of your gold.

There's not really much of a plot beyond the single screen that pops up when you start the game. You can play the dungeons in almost any order, though each only has a single level, and none of your items or statistics transfer over between stages. So while later dungeons are much larger and more complex than earlier ones, there are still plenty of easy enemies, since you're always starting at level one and need to crawl up through the ranks every time. Once you've beaten all of the main scenarios, you can unlock the final one, and see the ending.

On its own terms, *Double Dungeons* is way too simple to be enjoyable. While it's fast-paced, there's not much in it beyond hacking-and-slashing, and all the dungeons look identical. But with a buddy, it's definitely a little more entertaining, mostly because there's nothing else out there like it.

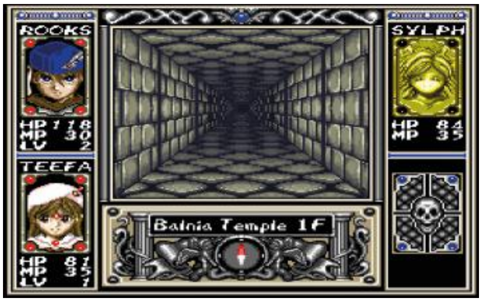
Arcana

Developer: HAL | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): SNES

HAL's *Arcana* takes place in the land of Elemen, where powerful warriors called Card Masters threaten the rule of the evil Galneon. Most of these fighters have been ruthlessly hunted down, though the young Rooks survives, and trains himself to rise up against his oppressors. There are five chapters altogether.

Along with SEGA's *Shining in the Darkness*, *Arcana* was one of the few first-person dungeon crawlers to be localised in the early 16-bit console days. All of the characters and abilities are visually represented as cards – when a character is killed, their card is torn, for example. As usual, there are magic spells based on the four elements, plus you can buy cards and combine them for increased power. Rooks can also summon a spirit associated with one of these cards, which takes up one of the four party member slots. The other two slots are occupied by whichever characters are assigned to you for your current chapter. Each chapter also focuses on a specific set of dungeons, and you cannot backtrack to previously completed areas.

While neither the combat nor the dungeon layouts are quite as advanced as in *Wizardry* or even something like *Shin Megami Tensei*, *Arcana* is still tough. When a human character falls in battle, the entire game is over. Spirits can be killed without triggering a game over, but they can't be levelled up like regular characters. The only save point is in the town, and super-powerful boss fights often pop up without warning, leaving you unprepared, and typically slaughtered, until you know how to approach them the next time around. It is rather unusual for its time, though overall the game is quite average. Watch out for a cameo of HAL's mascot Kirby in the intro though!



ARCANA
SUPER NINTENDO

***Arcana* was one of the few early RPGs to make it out in English for the SNES.**

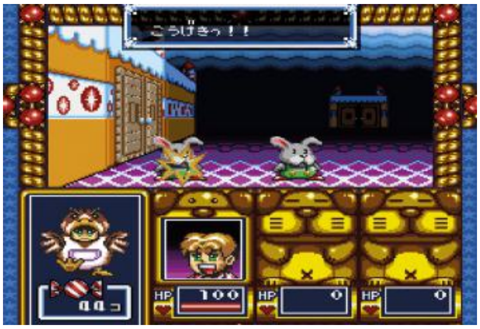
Yume Meikyuu: Kigurumi no Daibouken

Developer: Axes Art Amuse | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): SFC

Yume Meikyuu: Kigurumi no Daibouken ("Dream Labyrinth: Great Costume Adventure") is, appropriately enough, a dungeon crawler that takes place in a dream world filled with several strange towers. The goal is to rescue the queen and princess of Enderia, whose kingdom has been overrun by possessed stuffed animals. Rather than having character classes or weaponry, you wear costumes stolen from defeated enemies to improve your stats and change your abilities. Each have different sizes for use by the various player characters, and they can be taken apart and recombined by a tailor. Costumes include cats, chickens, pandas, cows, penguins and more; the dungeons include a cake tower and a TV tower.

In battles, rather than directly picking enemies, you choose a location to target from the on-screen 3 × 5 grid. It's actually rather annoying though, since you can't just click through combat and must make adjustments every time. Plus, enemies have a nasty and frequent habit of moving and dodging your attacks. Plus, there are no experience points, just candy (which can be used as either a curative or currency), so fights end up feeling slow and pointless unless you're trying to get a particular costume, plus it's hard to escape from encounters.

Being such a colourful game, it gives the impression that it's aimed at kids, but this is very much aimed at dungeon-crawler fans, with fairly complex layouts and plenty of traps. Still, in spite of the sluggish battle system and many balancing issues, the weirdness of the dungeons, plus the novelty of the costumes, make it worth a look, if only for a bit.



The cutesy visuals belie the fact that this SFC dungeon crawler can be pretty difficult.

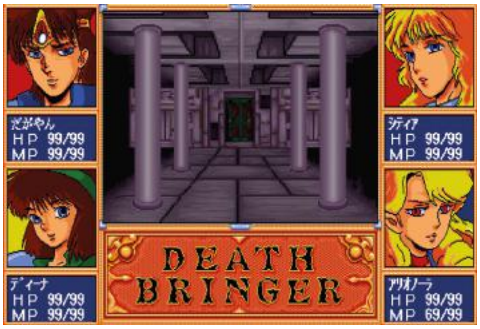
Death Bringer

Developer: Telenet | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, X68, MCD, PCECD

Death Bringer was released on Telenet's fifth anniversary, and is one of their earliest RPGs, barring the action RPG *XZR/Exile*. It has the usual fantasy story, in which a bunch of heroes have to defeat an ancient evil god ... except the twist is that those heroes are actually the people responsible for accidentally resurrecting it.

The game uses a day/night cycle, which is relatively unusual in a first-person dungeon crawler. Battles are fought from an overhead perspective (as in XtalSoft's *Fantasian*), and it features an interesting weapon and magic skill-learning system, which uses the character's intelligence stat. Unlike most games of this type, this one has no random encounters, and enemies are visible roaming around the mazes, so they can be avoided.

In many ways, it's a pretty standard dungeon crawler, but if Telenet was known for anything, it was making nice-looking games. The character designs are by Kazuhiro Ochi, who was prolific in the anime industry and also did the art for Telenet's later *Cosmic Fantasy* series. The package design, at least for the original PC version, is by Yasushi Torisawa, known for many Ultraman and kaijuu designs. The game was ported to assorted PC platforms, as well as 16-bit consoles. The PC Engine version changes the character art and looks terrible in all facets; the Mega CD version is far better but changes the battle system to a more standard *Dragon Quest*-style system. (By the way, don't confuse this one with the Western PC games of the same name: a 1989 Pandora dungeon crawler, and a 1991 Empire Software action game.) Telenet continued their dungeon crawler line with *Arcus* (see page 46).



Telenet games often feel rushed and underdeveloped, and *Death Bringer* is no different, but it does try a few interesting things.

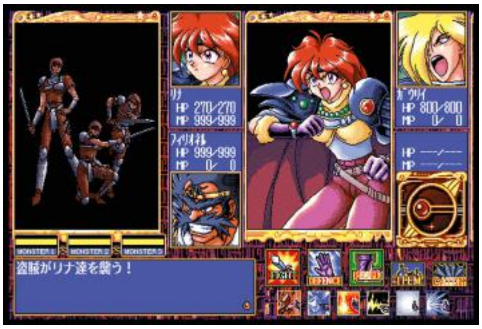
Slayers

Developer: NIC Spirits | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): PC98

Slayers was a fairly popular fantasy franchise, which began in novel form before expanding into manga and anime. It stars sorceress Lina Inverse as she adventures with her hapless swordsman companion, Gourry Gabriev, through a number of comical scenarios; it's much more lighthearted than something like *Lodoss War*. There were a number of RPGs based on the *Slayers* franchise, which were typical JRPGs and strategy RPGs for the Super Famicom and Saturn; in other words, nothing too remarkable. However, the first (and most interesting) entry was for PC98 home computers, released in 1994.

The story is pretty typical stuff – Lina and her companions go on adventures, some of which were newly created for this game – but the presentation is quite remarkable. Utilising the high resolution of the PC98's display, the graphics are much crisper than anything home consoles could produce at the time, with an art style that perfectly matches up with the anime. Battles consist primarily of large still images, which change depending on who's attacking, with little portraits that pop up with each attack.

Most of the emphasis was put on presentation, because the game itself is fairly simple. You control Lina, Goury, and other companions through assorted mazes. There are no experience points or levels to gain, and you have all of the skills you need from the outset, plus you can only directly control Lina. Also, considering that this is a first-person dungeon crawler, the actual first-person window is incredibly small, with the screen otherwise taken up by character portraits and a gigantic map.



盗賊がリナ達を襲う！

While average as a first-person dungeon crawler, the visuals in this anime tie-in were far beyond what could be seen on consoles of the era.

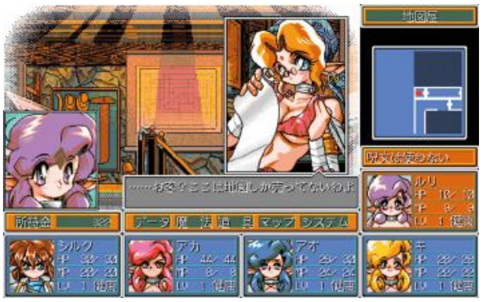
Dragon Master Silk

Developer: Gimmick House | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): PC98, SAT

First-person dungeon crawlers in which the standard fantasy characters were replaced by naked or nearly-naked female ones was a prolific genre in the PC RPG scene. Gimmick House's *Dragon Master Silk* series is one of the better ones, if mostly because it's not really pornographic, even if the emphasis is on scantily-clad women.

The heroine is the eponymous dragon master Silk, who's on a quest to hunt down some magical orbs, joined by three dragon women, Aka, Ao, and Ki, who are colour coordinated, with matching Japanese names and hair (red, blue, and yellow). The dungeon crawling and combat are relatively straightforward, though the maps themselves can get fairly complex.

The real draw is, of course, the character artwork and the writing. The designs were provided by Hiroshi Kajiyama, mostly known for his work on assorted *Shining Force* games. His artwork here is much cutesier, as this is really a bishoujo game, but it's also quite distinct from the usual anime character designs of the time. There are lots of funny cutscenes and plenty of goofy dialogue, complete with voice acting.



DRAGON MASTER Silk
SEGA SATURN

Dragon Master Silk originated on the PC98, with two entries, but it received a port to the Saturn as well. This version features a full-screen view with smoother animation, as in *Devil Summoner*, that constituted it a big technical improvement over the square-by-square movement of the PC version. Though published before the existence of a rating system, SEGA was a little more permissive about this type of mildly ecchi game than Sony. Publisher Datam Polystar felt strongly enough about the franchise that it published a board game spinoff called *Sugoventure: Dragon Master Silk Gaiden*.

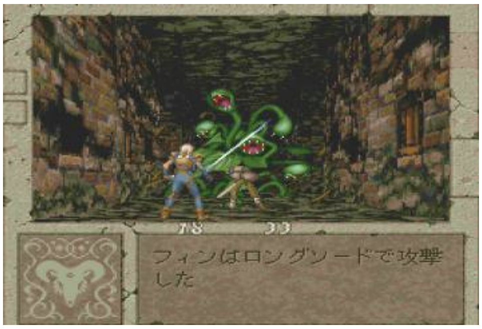
This series is mostly known for the all-female character artwork by Hiroshi Kajiyama, otherwise known for many entries in the *Shining Force* series.

Boundary Gate

Developer: Polestar | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PCFX, PS1

In *Boundary Gate: Daughter of Kingdom*, the hero is a warrior named Fin, who's journeyed to the Kingdom of Ambrose and become a bodyguard for a girl named Lisp. The two then begin receiving visions from Kiral, the princess of the kingdom, who is opening several boundary gates to an ancient civilisation. Lisp seems to be connected to this, but how?

As a 1997 release, *Boundary Gate* feels a little out of time. Initially released for the PC-FX, it looks and feels more like an early *Shin Megami Tensei* game for the Super Famicom. Key plot points are told through illustrated stills, though, and these are very cool – the character outfits have a South American influence, while the ancient civilisation is far more advanced, with some cool cybernetic designs. While exploration is first-person, the characters hop into the scenery whenever they do battle, viewed from a behind-the-back perspective. The animation is a little simple, the enemy designs are, again, excellent, and some spell effects are particularly impressive. The PlayStation port also implements smoother movement, though it still feels behind *Shining the Holy Ark*.


フィンはロングソードで攻撃した

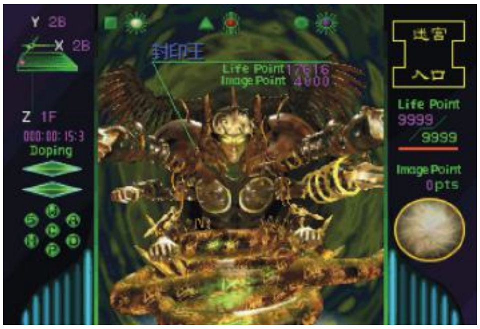
PC-FX
NEC
BOUNDARY GATE

The story is also pretty cool, if rather thin – outside of the introduction, the plot doesn't really advance until you begin approaching the end. The battling is also fairly standard, with some interesting tweaks: among the available weapon types, some are weak but hit multiple times, others are strong but only hit once. Plus it's that rarity: a game of this era that allows you to adjust the random encounter rate. Altogether, it's rather quaint, but the cool 2D visuals and interesting story make it worthwhile.

The interesting setting and cool artwork help this mid-'90s dungeon crawler stand out.

Nemuru Mayu

Developer: Asmik Ace | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): PS1



Nemuru Mayu ("Sleeping Cocoon") tells the story of a demonic tome, which has entrapped the souls of four knights. You control another human, who has been sucked into the book – and given the default name the Accursed One. You must explore the dungeons associated with each of the sleeping warriors, so that all can be freed from the demon's influence. The game was designed by Yukinori Tokoro, who was mostly known as a photographer, but also had a penchant for surreal art. Indeed, the labyrinths you explore are not termed dungeons, but rather Dreams, which should give you an idea as to how uncanny the game feels.

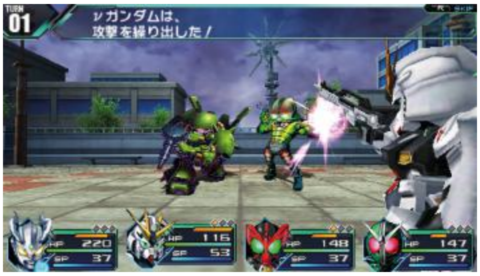
The game is a first-person dungeon crawler, though you only control a single player. Each of the four knights has their own set of mazes, 19 floors deep, and associated with an identifying colour. Add in the 13 levels of Dream Tower, the final dungeon, and the total is 89 floors, though many are quite similar, so it gets quite repetitive.

The game also has an extremely unusual battle system. When you walk into an enemy, you're transported to a separate arena where you can only move forwards or backwards. You can run up and use physical attacks, or cast magic spells by summoning runes – as the strokes of an invisible pen trace its shape, you hit marks in a specific rhythm, strengthening the spell. Meanwhile, your opponent is doing the same thing, but you can also reflect their spells back at them. Combined with the huge number of random item drops and hidden stuff, this turns the whole game into a unique experience for every player.

The mid-to-late '90s was a period when many artists discovered video games, and started adding their unique styles to this interactive setting.

Lost Heroes

Developer: Lancarse | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): PSP, 3DS



PSP
ロストヒーローズ
LOST HEROES

In the '90s, Banpresto began the *Compati Hero* series, a selection of games spanning multiple genres and starring characters from assorted mecha and tokusatsu properties. They were generally well regarded, particularly the *Great Battle* series on the Super Famicom, but puttered out in the PS1 era. The line was resurrected in 2012, first with an action game called *Great Battle Fullblast*, then continuing the revival with *Lost Heroes*, a first-person dungeon crawler. It was developed by Lancarse, the team behind Atlus' *Etrian Odyssey* games, so it feels a lot like them.

There are three main classes for the properties featured in the game – Ultraman, Gundam, and Kamen Rider – with five different characters within each class. Some have their own unique talents – Gundams can attack all enemies at once, while the Ultraman characters flip between "red" and "green" states every few turns, which affects their attack powers. There's also a skill-learning system like *Etrian Odyssey*'s, allowing you to spend acquired SP points to unlock abilities on a tree. The difficulty level isn't quite as high as in the *Etrian* games, as you can hop back to your home base at any time, and there are save/warp points in the dungeons, but it's no cakewalk either. The enemies are presented as static 2D sprites, though when one of your party members attacks, they hop into battle as 3D models.

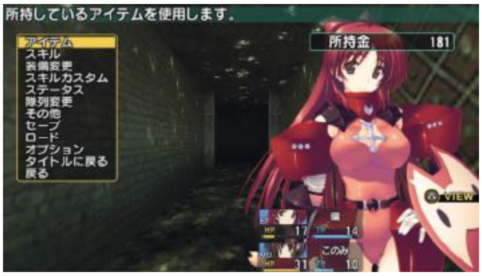
The first entry was released on both the PSP and the 3DS, while the sequel is 3DS only. Like many of the games that use licensed properties, both were released only in Japan. The sequel included a download code for a port of the 1992 Super Famicom RPG *Hero Senki Project Olympus*.

***Lost Heroes* is basically *Etrian Odyssey* with famous mecha and tokusatsu characters.**

Dungeon Travelers (series)

Developer: Sting | Released: 2011 | Platform(s): PSP, PSV

To Heart 2 is a fairly well regarded erotic bishoujo game from Aquaplus/Leaf, which was released in 1999. There was a fan disc called *Aika de Ikuno!!* released in 2009 which contained a variety of spinoff mini-games, one of which, *Final Dragon Chronicle: Guilty Requiem*, was a first-person dungeon crawler. It reimagines all of the girls as fantasy-type heroines, with all of the monsters being either (often scantily-clad) girls, or other cutesy creatures. The concept was then expanded into a separate release for the PSP and Vita, called *To Heart 2: Dungeon Travelers*.


所持しているアイテムを使用します。

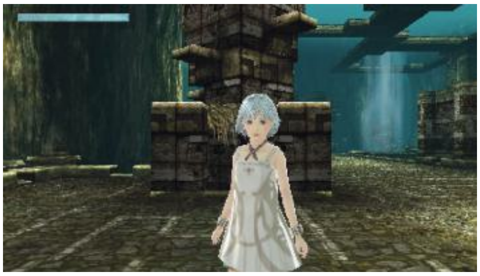
Busty red-haired knight Tamaki Kousaka is the poster child for the first *Dungeon Travelers* game.

There are 19 characters in total, each of whom is assigned to a base class (Fighter, Magician, Maid, and Scout), and can be upgraded to more advanced ones as they grow in power. As with most bishoujo games, the main appeal is seeing the girls dressed in different outfits. The battle system is a bit different from that of other dungeon crawlers, in that character order is determined by speed. Most spells also take time to cast, usually requiring that other characters act first. Since it was developed by Sting, a veteran of RPGs, it's better balanced than some other companies' fan-service dungeon crawlers.

The game was popular enough that Aquaplus/Leaf created a sequel without the *To Heart* franchise attached, instead featuring a bunch of original characters. Now just called *Dungeon Travelers 2*, this too was released for the PSP and Vita. Other than the characters and a few small additions (like an extra character class), it's mostly the same, right down to the suggestive CG artwork. The Vita version was released internationally by Atlus, though they had to cut out some of the more explicit artwork.

Labyrinth no Kanata

Developer: tri-Ace | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): 3DS



KONAMI
ラビリンスの彼方
NINTENDO 3DS

tri-Ace games are known for their unusual battle mechanics, and this Japan-only 3DS DRPG definitely makes use of them.

Labyrinth no Kanata ("Beyond the Labyrinth") initially presents itself as an 8-bit-style dungeon crawling MMO, in which the player teams up with three other "people" to hunt for treasure and beat up baddies. But things quickly get weird when they hear the voice of a young woman calling for help. Once you find her, the retro facade gives way to a beautiful rendered labyrinth, through which you accompany the girl to figure out what's going on. It's a really cool premise presented in an interesting package – the three team members communicate only through text boxes, while the girl, always tagging along next to your viewpoint, talks in full speech.

tri-Ace's battle systems are often unique, and this game uses familiar mechanics but flips them on their head. Combatants are assigned colours of red, green, and blue, which have a rock-paper-scissors relationship. If you hit the element yours beats, the resulting damage pops up into the air as a colour, and is absorbed by the next character matching that colour, healing them, whether friend or foe. This is one of the only real ways to restore the HP of your party. You can pick the strength of your attack, which will also influence your place in the turn queue. In other words, you need to manipulate the queue in order to take advantage of the elements, restore your HP, and deny it to your enemies. The girl is mostly useless in combat at first, but eventually gets magic spells, and you need to both protect and work in tandem with her to inflict the most damage.

It's a great battle system, and when coupled with the gorgeous atmosphere of the labyrinth, makes for a compelling experience. Alas, publisher Konami didn't bother localising it, making it Japan-only.

Japanese Rogue-likes

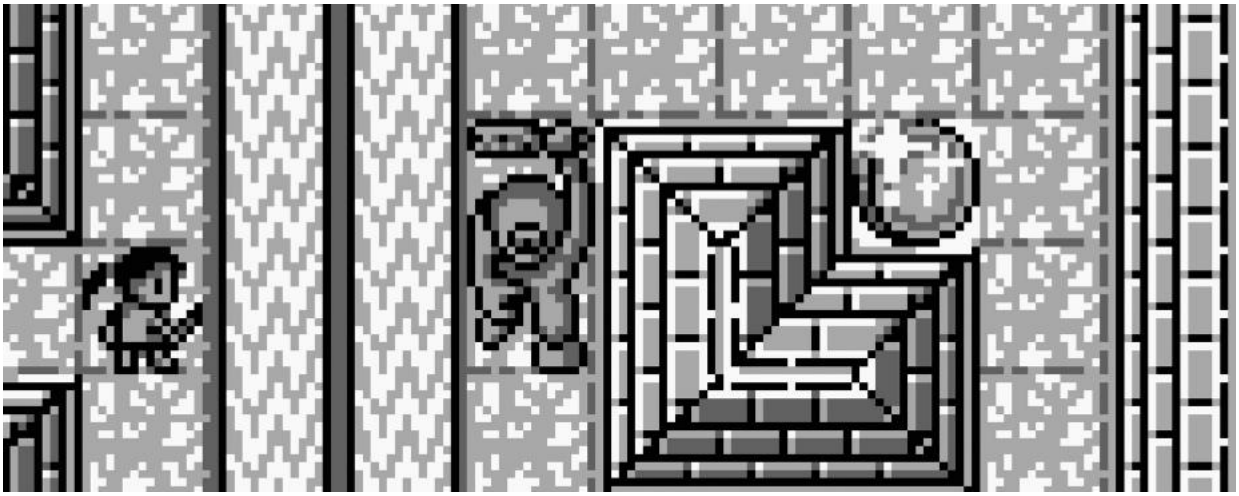
Initially developed in 1980 for Unix mainframe systems, *Rogue* ranks up next to *Ultima* and *Wizardry* as one of the most important role-playing games ever made. Focused entirely on dungeon crawling, it has you controlling a lone warrior through a series of randomly-generated rooms, picking up items and fighting monsters, exploring deeper and deeper, until you are eventually overwhelmed. Since everything is created procedurally, it provides a different experience with each play. And unlike other RPGs, which were fairly long and allowed you to save your progress, each run through its dungeon is relatively short, as once you're dead, you need to start again from scratch.

During the '80s, several variations of *Rogue* were made, including commercial releases. Many of these improved the visuals beyond the simple ASCII characters of the original. Later games, including Western ones, such as Epyx's *DunjonQuest* series, Blizzard's *Diablo*, and SEGA's *Toejam & Earl*, took elements from it, primarily its randomly generated nature. However, it wasn't until the 2008 indie smash hit *Spelunky* that the concept of a "Rogue-like" hit the mainstream consciousness, at least within the Western gaming sphere. These generally weren't RPGs, but rather other genres (typically action games or platformers) that featured procedurally-created levels and permadeath, though some games loosened that restriction by allowing some progress to be carried over between games.

However, among Japanese gamers, this renaissance came much earlier, in the Super Famicom era. While some publishers dabbled with *Rogue*'s concepts, like Konami (*Cave Noire*, 1991) and SEGA (*Fatal Labyrinth*, 1990), it was Chunsoft's 1993 *Mystery Dungeon* that introduced these concepts to a wider Japanese audience. It actually began as a *Dragon Quest* spinoff, called *Torneko no Daibouken: Fushigi no Dungeon* ("The Adventure of Torneko: Mystery Dungeon"), starring the rotund merchant from *Dragon Quest IV*. Though it looks like an action game at first glance, it works by the same rules as *Rogue* – characters move square-by-square, and the action is turn-based, so enemies only move when you do.

Chunsoft continues the *Mystery Dungeon* series to this day, using characters from other video game franchises, as well as its own original properties. Other developers pattern their games after this series, as it introduced these mechanics. However, as with many Japanese RPGs, many of these games were not released outside their native land, and the ones that did got a chilly reception. The first such title was Konami's *Azure Dreams* for the PlayStation, which was met by reviewers with general confusion; the second *Torneko* game, localised as *Torneko's Last Hope*, received outright hostility. Indeed, they often featured somewhat simple graphics, and the randomly-generated scenarios just didn't make sense to many Western gamers at the time. However, given the modern popularity of Rogue-likes, the audience clearly has a broader understanding of what these games are, and what they're trying to accomplish.

Rogue-likes also involve dungeon crawling, but their randomly-generated nature and (traditionally) overhead perspectives make them a separate breed.



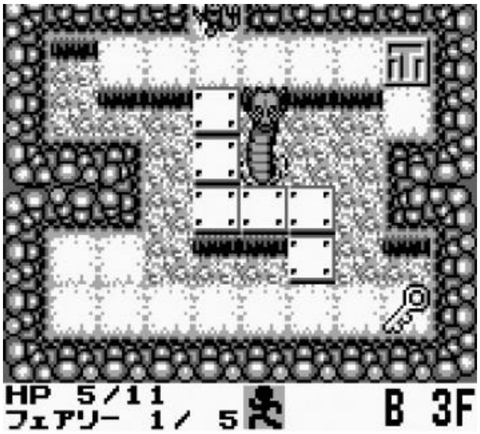
Cave Noire

Developer: Konami | Released: 1991 | Platform(s): GB

For a long time, *Rogue*-style games were restricted to personal computers. Though Chunsoft's 1993 *Mystery Dungeon* series is generally credited with popularising the sub-genre, at least in Japan, Konami had attempted its own take a few years earlier, with the 1991 Game Boy title *Cave Noire*.

The fundamentals of the sub-genre are in place – there are randomly-generated dungeons, and characters move in a turn-based fashion, square by square. *Cave Noire* offers you four separate dungeons, each with its own quests. In one, you may need to kill a certain number of monsters, while in another, you need to scrounge up enough money, or find enough orbs, or save enough caged fairies. Accomplish the goal and a door will open up somewhere, allowing you to exit and begin your next quest. These get more difficult with each new dive into the dungeon, and while your stats go up slightly, it's not really enough to compensate for the heightened difficulty. It's a rather brilliant approach; normal Rogue-likes can be brutal, requiring significant time investments and usually ending in failure. By breaking the game up into smaller chunks – even the longer dungeon crawls rarely last more than ten minutes – and providing concrete victory conditions, it allows for a game where success is a distinct possibility rather than a far-off dream.

That's not to say that *Cave Noire* is easy – the first few levels are cakewalks, but it quickly becomes much tougher. Careless decisions are still met with harsh consequences: just one mis-step can lead to doom. Another big difference from standard Rogue-likes lies in enemy movement. Mostly they trundle about in simple, distinct patterns, so they're easy to get around. Except in the cave where you're supposed to kill enemies, there's not much of an advantage to getting into fights – there are no experience points, and item drops are rare – so it's much better to calculate their movements and try to avoid them.



Various items can help you – healing potions and antidotes restore HP and cure poisoning, while swords and shields will slightly increase your stats for the remainder of the level. Cloaks will turn you invisible, flight powers will transport you to any tile in the room, boulders can be dropped to manipulate enemy movement, and so forth. You are given four items at the beginning of each quest, and the rest are found in treasure chests.

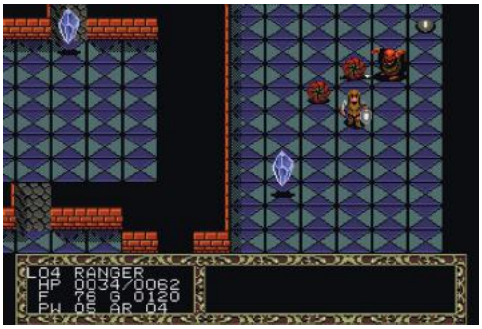
Cave Noire, being a Game Boy release and thus primarily for children, excels in player-friendliness, unlike its computer counterparts. It's breezy, and like many Konami titles, has excellent music. It's a good introduction to the sub-genre, and it's easy to play even for non-Japanese readers.

カーブノア
CAVE NOIRE
GAME BOY

Rogue-likes are often known for their brutal difficulty, but *Cave Noire* eases you into the concept.

Fatal Labyrinth

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): GEN, MCD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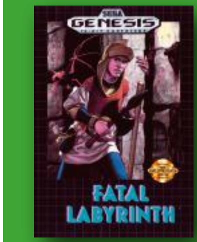


SEGA was generous in bringing out RPGs in English, even if it meant localising this rather bland-looking Rogue-like.

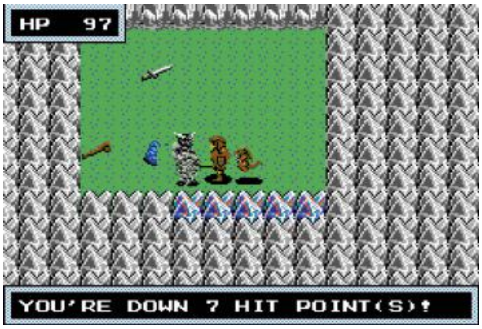
Fatal Labyrinth began as a title called *Shi no Meikyuu* for Meganet, an early game download service for the SEGA Mega Drive in Japan. Due to memory and bandwidth constraints, these had to be fairly small games, so a regular RPG probably wouldn't fit without severe simplification. To fit into the limited space, SEGA created this Rogue-like, one of the first to appear on a console platform. It was later re-released for the Mega CD as part of the *Game no Kanzume Vol. 2* compilation, and published as a separate game internationally, with a few graphical enhancements.

As a lone hero, you must travel through 30 floors of a dark castle to defeat a dragon and reclaim a holy grail. It adheres firmly to most *Rogue* conventions, including turn-by-turn movement, and items that must be used before their purpose becomes clear. There are plenty of weapons, of both mêlée and projectile types. Gold acts as a points system of sorts: wealth will grant you gravestones in the game-over screen that get fancier the more you have.

In contrast to Konami's *Cave Noire*, which accommodated players unfamiliar with its style by providing an introduction, *Fatal Labyrinth* makes no such concessions and is quite difficult right off the bat. The random generation is often too harsh, neglecting to give you the proper equipment to fight the enemies it produces. The only real aid is that it lets you continue from every fifth stage, so you don't need to start from scratch each time. The game is visually simple and quite ugly, especially compared to other SEGA RPGs like *Shining Force* and *Phantasy Star II*, and was met with a poor reception.

Dragon Crystal

Developer: SEGA | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): GG, SMS


```
HP  97
YOU'RE DOWN 7 HIT POINT(S)!
```

SEGA
DRAGON CRYSTAL

A sort of port/sequel to *Fatal Labyrinth*, *Dragon Crystal* is actually a slightly better experience.

Dragon Crystal can be considered a port of *Fatal Labyrinth* for SEGA's 8-bit systems, released for the Master System in Europe and for the Game Gear internationally. Despite technically being on weaker hardware, it's actually a little nicer-looking, owing to the bright colour palette. The game takes place in a variety of locations, like forests and deserts, so it's less drab than 30 floors of a dark castle.

It plays like its predecessor, albeit balanced slightly better – many enemies are reused, but stronger ones appear, appropriately, later in the game instead of early on. The food system in *Fatal Labyrinth* worked oddly, in that you could eat too much and die from overindulgence, which is kind of funny but in practice quite frustrating, so that aspect is gone. Gold can now be used to be purchase continues, too. However, in the Game Gear version, the speed is very slow, to accommodate the portable's blurry screen, and can only be sped up by holding the Start button. In the console versions, you can toggle faster walking speed with the pause button. The Master System version also benefits from the better resolution by enlarging the view, though the soundtrack is completely different and somewhat worse. The game did see a sequel solely for Japanese mobile phones, through their Sonic Cafe download service.

Overall, although *Dragon Crystal* is a better game than its forebear, it never really caught on, and it was a style that SEGA of Japan basically abandoned after this. SEGA's eccentric *Toejam & Earl*, developed in the United States and released for the Genesis in 1991, would later serve as a wider introduction to Rogue-likes, though it's a different type of game, which de-emphasises combat.

Mystery Dungeon (series)

Developer: Chunsoft | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): SFC, N64, DC, GBC, GBA, WII, DS and more

The *Mystery Dungeon* games form a long-lived series, dating back to the days of the Super Famicom, and essentially created their own subgenre. Created by Chunsoft, the developers of the early *Dragon Quest* games, the first *Mystery Dungeon* was a crossover from that universe. The series has waxed and waned in popularity but continues to this day, featuring characters from a variety of properties.

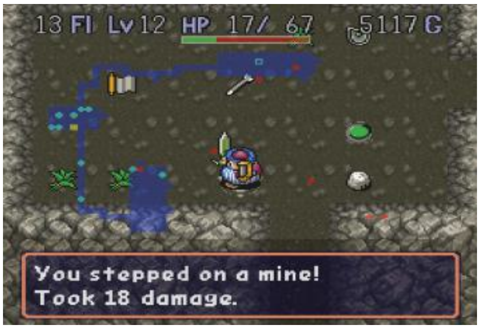
The original *Mystery Dungeon* was a follow-up to *Dragon Quest IV*. It stars Torneko (Taloon in the original NES game), a merchant who wants to build a grand item shop to support his family. To that end, he explores dangerous dungeons, searching for treasures. In between, there's a town to explore, its growth fuelled by your success. These segments are only there to provide an excuse for a story, and to give you people to talk to, many of whom will give play advice. The real game begins when you enter the dungeon.

Once in the dungeon, the game switches to a turn-based affair: every action Torneko takes, whether taking a step, resting a turn, making an attack or using an item, consumes one turn of time, and allows everyone else in the current level to take an action in response. The player may take as long as they like between turns, but once an action is taken, all the monsters may react. In addition to managing health, you also need to find food to manage your hunger meter. When Torneko either finishes his quest or runs out of hit points, he's returned to the outside world. The money he finds goes into improving his shop. However, if Torneko is killed, his current trip ends, and he's returned to the surface, minus his levels and all his items, but play continues, so you can try for another run.

The game eases you in by means of a tutorial quest that requires you to reach the tenth level, but has its main objective on the 20th. Once you find a dungeon's goal item, the game isn't over; you must still escape with it, going back up through the levels just passed. During your ascent the monsters usually found on each level are still there (so the game now gets easier as you go), but random items are no longer generated on each floor, forcing you to rely on the stuff you gained on the way down. Significantly, you must survive on the food you've already obtained on the way back up.

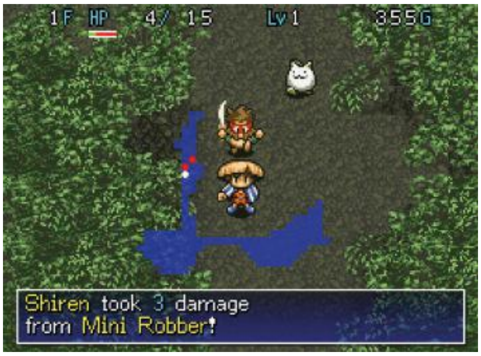
However, the real purpose of Torneko's explorations is to find gold and loot to fund his shop. Play involves descending into the caverns, fighting monsters and finding items, all randomised for each trip. The monsters encountered are the same kinds on each dungeon level, but their numbers and locations differ. After many games, the player will eventually form strategies for handing the many possible situations.

There's a variety of monster species, borrowed from *Dragon Quest*, and some have special powers to make Torneko's journey harder. There are various items that improve equipment power or

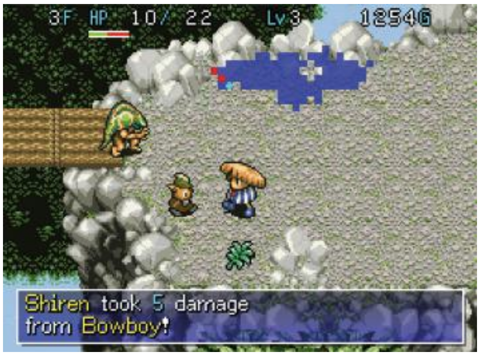


You stepped on a mine!
Took 18 damage.

The long-running *Mystery Dungeon* series began as a spinoff from the *Dragon Quest* series, before branching off in several other directions.



Shiren took 3 damage
from Mini Robber!



Shiren took 5 damage
from Bowboy!

While many *Mystery Dungeon* games tie in with established franchises, Chunsoft created the *Shiren the Wanderer* series so they'd have a property of their own.

can be used as weapons, like arrows or explosive Blaze Herbs. Compared to classic Rogue-like games, the first *Mystery Dungeon* game is a bit simple, but it's a good introduction. The interface in particular is suitable for the Super Famicom controller and has been used in the subsequent games.

Torneko was a surprising success, though for a sequel, Chunsoft decided to start its own franchise, dubbed *Fuurai no Shiren* ("Shiren the Wanderer"). This story takes place in a feudal Japan-like setting, starring the silent wanderer hero Shiren and his talking weasel friend Kappa. Despite the new setting, it looks and feels like its predecessor, and even includes music by the same composer, Koichi Sugiyama.

Shiren is out to cross Impasse Valley and climb the formidable Table Mountain, to see the Golden Condor thought to live there. The game is ten levels longer than *Torneko*, but far beyond that, it's a hugely more detailed, challenging, and entertaining adventure. *Shiren* is packed with cool things to discover, and it'll be many games before you've seen everything there is.

It is difficult to overstate what an advance *Shiren* is over *Torneko*. The makers of *Mystery Dungeon* have obviously played a lot of *Hack*, as many of its features show up in this game. These include helpers who can follow and assist you, blank scrolls you can turn into whatever type you want, multiple dungeon branches, and the ability to customise your equipment with qualities like rustproofing. There's a lot of new features that are unique to *Shiren* too, like random pots with useful effects, sub-quests that extend beyond each individual play, warehouses for safe item storage, NPCs in the dungeons, and more.

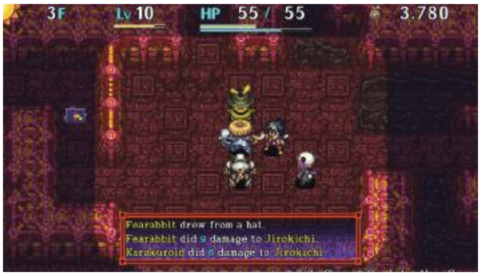
The dungeon is much more complex than *Torneko*'s, and is a large part of the fun of the game. Table Mountain itself is only the final stage of the journey; along the way there are towns to visit, shops to buy (or maybe steal) from, sub-quests to advance, and people to talk to. Some of these sub-quests eventually unlock new features, like new types of item or bonus dungeons.

Shiren was originally unreleased in English, though its Nintendo DS port in 2008 was released internationally. It's an excellent port too, including a second 100-level bonus dungeon, several extras, and assorted balance tweaks. There was also originally a feature whereby dying players could send out a request over the internet in hopes that another player would rescue them. With the shutdown of Nintendo's Wi-Fi Connection servers, this feature no longer works, but players can still generate a rescue password that another player with a copy of the game can use.

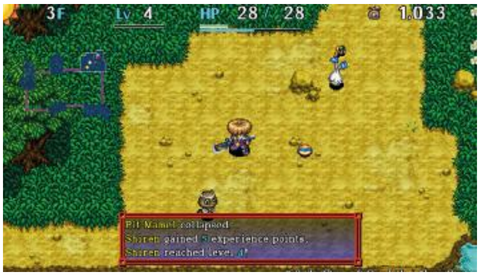
From here, the two sub-series branched off. *Shiren* went portable on the Game Boy with *Tsukikagemura no Kaibutsu* ("Monster of Moonshadow Village"); this was later remade with SFC-style visuals for Windows. This game has a difficulty select, plus it's the only game in the series that requires a round trip back to the entrance to beat the dungeon. In the portable line, next came *Sabaku no Majou* ("Demon Castle of the Desert") for the Game Boy Color, which moves the series to a new setting. It also features several dungeons to play through, and was technically the first game to use the rescue function found in the DS remake of the first *Shiren the Wanderer*. It was also later remade as *Fuurai no Shiren DS2*, for the DS, obviously. After that there was *Shiren Monsters Netsal*, which isn't a Rogue-like but rather a futsal sports game for the Game Boy Advance.

Back on consoles, the next mainline entry was released on the Nintendo 64, entitled *Oni Shuurai! Shirenjou!* ("Demon Invasion! Shiren Castle"); it's technically a prequel, starring a child Shiren. The main aspect of this game is the castle-building, the materials needed to fix your main fortress being found in the dungeon. Perhaps borrowing from *Pokémon*, you can also befriend creatures and capture them in jars, then bring them out for attack. This release also started the trend of multiple dungeons (it came out before *Shiren GB2*.) Next came a *Gaiden* spinoff subtitled *Onna Kenshi Asuka Kenzan!* ("Swordswoman Asuka Appears!"), released for the Dreamcast and Windows. This game has an equipment modification system, as well as an Electric Box that replaces the monster-capturing system, involving upgrading a robot that works similarly. Both versions also enabled online play in weekly dungeons.

The third *Shiren* game was *Karakuri Yashiki no Nemuri Hime* ("The Sleeping Princess of the Clockwork Mansion"), and was released in North America for the Wii as just plain *Shiren the*



Fearabbit drew from a hat.
Fearabbit did 9 damage to Jirokichi.
Karakuroid did 6 damage to Jirokichi.



Pit Mamel collapsed.
Shiren gained 5 experience points.
Shiren reached level 4!

PS VITA
SHIREN

***Shiren the Wanderer* has seen sporadic releases outside of Japan, the most recent being the fifth game, initially released on the Vita.**

Wanderer. In this version, levels are persistent and no longer reset when you leave the dungeon. This alone was a huge point of contention among *Mystery Dungeon* fans, and why in general, the game is rather disliked by them. It also lets you control three characters: Shiren, Asuka, and Sensei. It was later ported to the PSP in Japan.

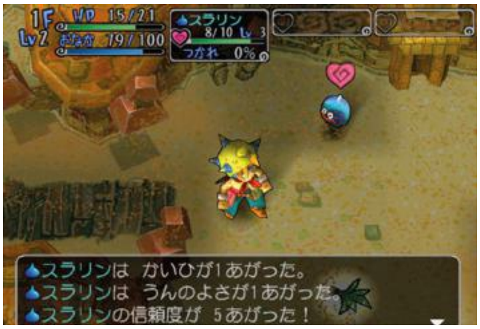
The fourth *Shiren* game, *Kami no Me to Akuma no Heso* ("The God's Eye and The Devil's Navel") was Japan-only, for both the DS and PSP. This version reels back the main changes from the third game, and adds other elements like day/night dungeons and equipment that can gain experience levels. The fifth *Shiren* game was initially released on the DS, with a Vita port released in English as *The Tower of Fortune and the Dice of Fate*, and is similar to its predecessor.

In parallel with the *Shiren* games, Chunsoft also released more games in the *Torneko* line. The second of these was released on the PlayStation, and was the first *Mystery Dungeon* game released in North America, as *Torneko: The Last Hope*. It imports many of the improvements from *Shiren the Wanderer* and adds a few new things, like a bank and a bakery, as well as a simple class system so you can have Torneko switch between Fighter and Wizard. The game was poorly received by both the American press and gamers, who didn't really have the context to understand this type of Rogue-like, even though the difficulty of this entry is pretty low. This game was later ported to the Game Boy Advance.

Torneko no Daibouken 3 made it to the PlayStation 2, later ported to the Game Boy Advance. Torneko's son Popolo has fallen ill on a vacation, and his dad must save him. This version includes a world map, on which you walk to different towns before visiting dungeons. Torneko is also joined by companions, Rosa and Ines, plus Popolo can also be a playable character. It includes a monster-capturing system. Like the third *Shiren* game, this one gets rid of the level reset upon leaving a dungeon, again making it contentious among fans.

This was the last *Mystery Dungeon* starring Torneko, but not the last *Dragon Quest* tie-in. Next up was *Shounen Yangus to Fushigi no Dungeon* ("Boy Yangus and the Mystery Dungeon"), starring a kid version of Yangus, the breakout star from *Dragon Quest VIII*. Like that game, it features pleasant cel-shaded visuals. It removes some of the changes from *Torneko no Daibouken 3*, like the world map and level non-resets, but keeps the monster-collecting and adds in a monster fusion system; it also integrated the Tension system from *DQVIII*.

Final Fantasy also received a series of *Mystery Dungeon* games. The first was *Chocobo's Mystery Dungeon* for the PlayStation in 1997, starring the cutesy yellow birds as well as other monsters, like Moogles, from the *Final Fantasy* games; it was not developed by Chunsoft but rather Square and Banpresto. It uses the series' trademark Active Time Battle system and includes summon monsters, as well as featuring various accommodations for novice players. The sequel made its way to North America, and includes companion characters, a stronger storyline, and tweaks to the way the Active Time Battle system works. This was followed up by *Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo's Dungeon* for the Wii (also in English), and later the DS in Japan, remade internationally in 2019 as *Chocobo's Mystery Dungeon: Every Buddy!* This stars a treasure hunter named Cid and his buddy Chocobo, and uses the Job system found in other *Final Fantasy* games.



スラリンは かいひが1あがった。
スラリンは うんのよさが1あがった。
スラリンの信頼度が 5あがった！

Chunsoft has also occasionally revisited *Dragon Quest* in some of their later games, the most recent one starring a young version of Yangus from the eighth game.

PlayStation.2

Pokémon was the next franchise to see a *Mystery Dungeon* tie-in, first released in 2005. These are released for every new generation, with multiple titles offering a slightly different mix of Pokémon, and requiring coordination between the games in order to befriend all of them.

The first generation of the series, *Red Rescue Team* and *Blue Rescue Team*, was released across two different platforms. *Blue Rescue Team* was a Nintendo DS game while *Red Rescue Team* came out for the Game Boy Advance. The cross-system nature of this generation allowed for a unique method of communication: the original release for the Nintendo DS had a GBA cartridge slot, so a player with both games to hand could insert them both at once, and the *Blue Rescue Team* cartridge could then see and manipulate the data on the *Red Rescue Team* cart.

The basic story in most of the games is similar: the player's character is a human being who is mysteriously transformed into a Pokémon. Which Pokémon they become is determined by a personality quiz at the start of the game. Once transformed, they are able to communicate with other Pokémon, and can begin to build a team in order to solve whatever problems are affecting the area.

Since these games are aimed at kids, the main game does away with traditional Rogue-like permadeath, allowing Pokémon to retain their experience after defeats, which lessens the feel that each expedition is its own separate thing. However, it does feel like *Pokémon* is made for this sort of gameplay. Even the first games faithfully implement hundreds of the Pokémon, eventually allowing them to evolve though their forms and giving them moves close to what they would have in the main games, which have been translated well into Rogue-like terms. And the large number of Pokémon provides for more opponents and allies than any standard Rogue-like would dream of, although with a bit less personality.

Subsequent games in the series are pretty similar, mostly upgrading the graphics, tweaking the mechanics, and adding more Pokémon. Next up came *Explorers of Time* and *Explorers of Darkness,* both for the DS, which add in fourth-generation Pokémon. An enhanced version, *Explorers of Sky,* adds more Pokémon as well as extra storyline episodes. This was followed up by a trilogy of Japanese-only WiiWare games, part of the *Adventure Team* trilogy, which moved to 3D graphics. The series jumped to the 3DS with two more entries, *Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Gates to Infinity*, and *Pokémon Super Mystery Dungeon.* The original GBA and DS game pair was also remade as a single game for the Switch as *Rescue Team DX.*

Even lesser known game series received some *Mystery Dungeon* games. *The Nightmare of Druaga: Fushigi no Dungeon* was released for the PlayStation 2 in 2004, as a tie-in to Namco's 1984 *The Tower of Druaga.* The goal, as in the original, is to find the key on each floor and use it to unlock the next area. Unlike most *Mystery Dungeon* games, the floors are not randomised, but the items are; as in the arcade game, there are specific requirements to be met in order for hidden treasures to appear. Rather than hunger, your light is constantly depleted, and needs to be replenished, or else you'll find yourself wandering in the dark. There's no permadeath – you lose your items and half your experience instead – but it's still an incredibly hard game.

Etrian Odyssey, the retro-styled 3D dungeon crawler from Atlus, also had two *Mystery Dungeon* games, both for the 3DS. These let you roam dungeons with a whole party of characters, whose classes come from the main games. They also include things like level branching and town development, plus creatures called DOEs, similar to the near-invincible FOE monsters. These work their way through the layers of the dungeon and attempt to destroy your central fort, and can only be beaten under certain circumstances. The first game was released internationally; the second game, which adds in a few character classes and subclassing, was Japan only.

Finally, there was also a Gundam tie-in called *Kidou Senshi Gundam: Fushigi no Dungeon.* However, it did not see any console or portable releases, and was only developed for Japanese mobile phones, which means it will likely be lost forever.

B2F
Snivy
Lv 50
HP 80/80

Of the *Mystery Dungeon* renditions, the most successful, or at least most widely recognised outside of Japan, stars Pokémon.

Max

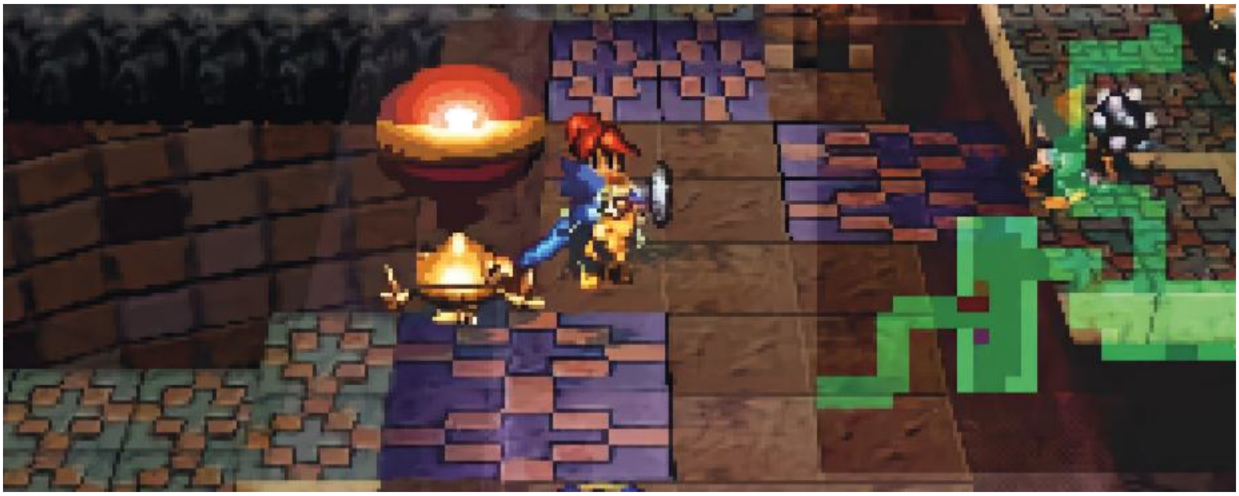
Come on! We'll go, and my old pops will never know!

B1F
Ash
Lv. 10
HP 47/47

the Charging status condition.

Max used Ember!

Pokémon
Super
Mystery Dungeon
Nintendo 3DS



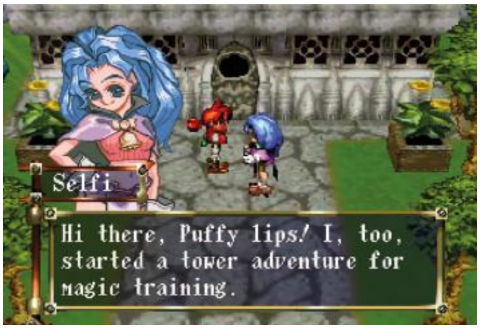
Azure Dreams

Developer: Konami | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1, GBC

Azure Dreams is a combination of a few different genres. At its heart, it's a Rogue-like inspired by the *Mystery Dungeon* series, but it mixes in elements of monster-raising, town-building, and even romance simulations. You control a boy (default name Koh) as he explores the monster tower next to his hometown. He is accompanied by a monster, who acts as his familiar and aids in combat.

As is typical of these games, each floor is randomly generated, and you rummage for items and beat up in monsters in a turn-based fashion. The game plays, in part, by Rogue-like rules, in that Koh always starts a run through the dungeon at level one. However, familiars maintain their levels regardless, plus if you manage to find a way to escape the dungeon, you can keep any equipment that you've found. This way, you can bring home any eggs you find, to hatch and breed new familiars, and sell stuff to get extra cash. Then you can put that money back into the town – you can build a race track, a casino, a theatre, or any number of things to improve the lives of the townspeople, or you can expand your house from a single-room hovel to a gigantic mansion. Many of these are essentially mini-games that you can play to get even more cash. Additionally, there are seven girls in the town whom you can attempt to woo, based on what you build and what other things you can accomplish in the tower. There's not much of an actual reason to do this, though, beyond your own self-fulfilment. There is also a rival male named Ghosh, who seems like he's set up to be a same-sex romantic partner, but in the late '90s publishers were too scared to commit to that.

As with most games that try to juggle too many balls, *Azure Dreams* is a little undercooked. The opening hours are the roughest, because you need to find ways to bring equipment back, but the random numbers need to be in your favour for you to get a wind crystal, which allows you to return with everything. And until you build up a good number of those, it's frustrating. The town-building elements are a little limited, and there's just not enough, narratively or mechanically, to the dating sim part to make it interesting. It doesn't help that the girls are only broadly defined and the artwork really isn't all that attractive. Still, it's pretty gutsy that Konami even localised *Azure Dreams*, especially considering that, as at its mid-1998 release, international audiences wouldn't have experienced the games (*Mystery Dungeon*, *Dragon Quest V*, *Pokémon*, *Tokimeki Memorial*) that influenced it.



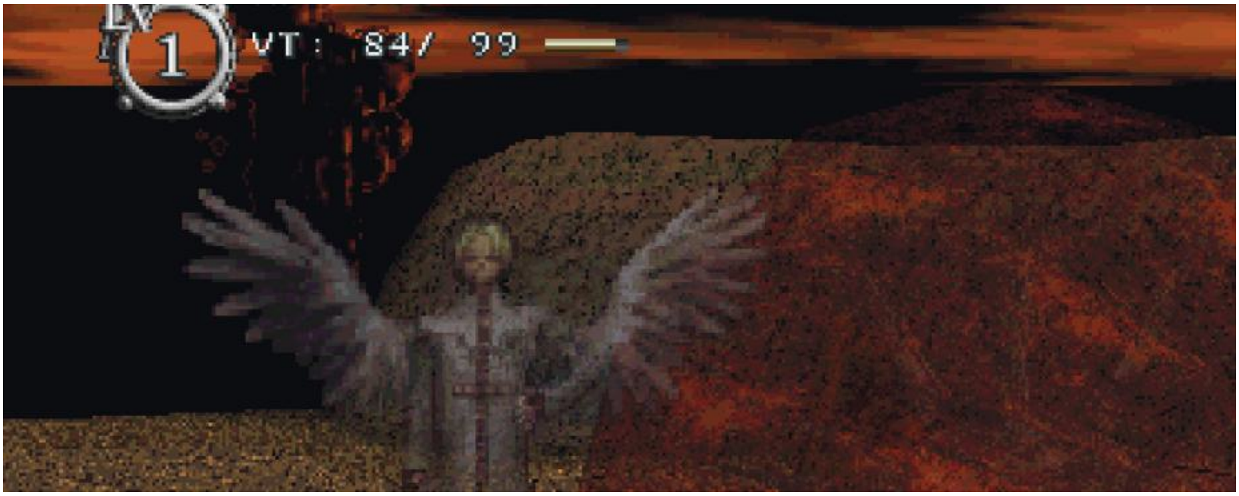
Selfi

Hi there, Puffy lips! I, too, started a tower adventure for magic training.

PlayStation
Azure Dreams

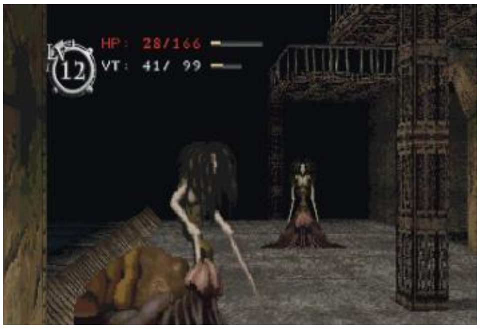
***Azure Dreams* takes the *Mystery Dungeon* formula and adds in town-building, monster-raising, and dating.**

Azure Dreams received a Game Boy Color port, which uses fully top-down 2D rather than the somewhat ugly 2D sprites on 3D backgrounds of the PlayStation version. It cuts the dating and town-building parts, but it also adds in a proper ending, which the original release lacked. A pseudo-sequel was also released on the Nintendo DS, too, called *Tao's Adventure*, though like the Game Boy Color *Azure Dreams*, it removes nearly all of the sim elements.



Baroque

Developer: Sting | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): SAT, PS1, PS2, WII, NSW



It may be extremely difficult to play, but fans of *Silent Hill* will definitely be drawn to *Baroque*'s post-apocalyptic, rusted-decay aesthetic. The original Saturn version was released on the Switch in 2020.

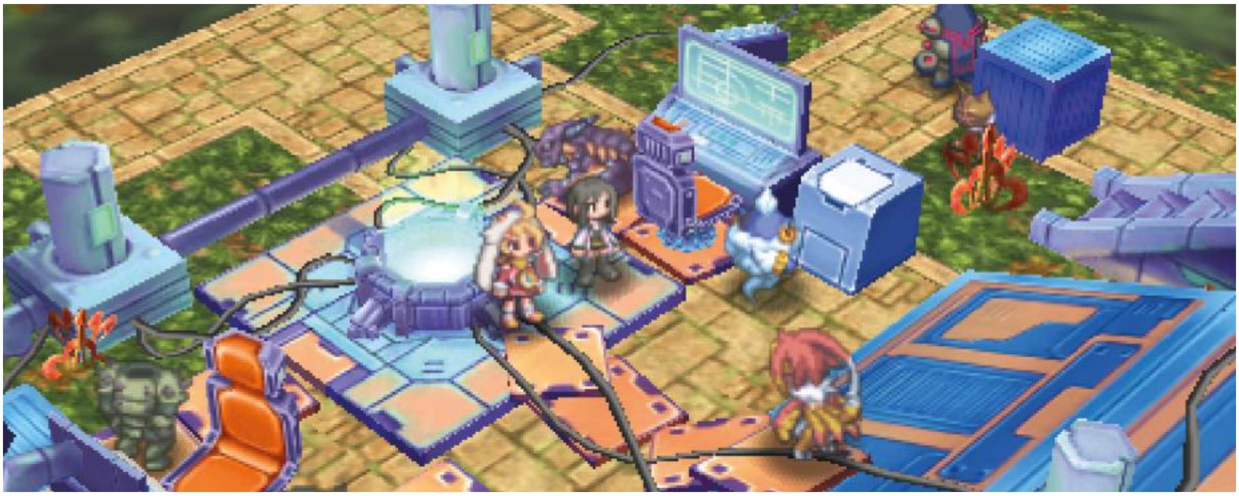
It's the year 2032, and Earth has been annihilated by a catastrophic event called the Blaze. You control a silent, amnesiac hero, tasked with exploring the Neuro Tower to atone for some kind of sin he has forgotten. Was he responsible for the apocalypse? What are all of the strange creatures that gather at the tower's base, whose delusions have distorted their bodies? Who is the angel pointing you onwards?

Baroque revels in this vagueness. Little of the story makes any real sense at the outset, and the bizarre dialogue rarely paints much of a picture either. But it's not just the story that's clouded in mystery, but the game structure itself. The game is a Rogue-like, with the Neuro Tower being the central dungeon. However, it builds the concepts of death and rebirth into the narrative, as the characters acknowledge your continued attempts. You're expected to die, and die often, with little bits of the backstory doled out in flashes. It's fascinating, but at the same time, it's nearly impossible to know if you're really advancing the story, or what steps you're supposed to take to actually beat the game, beyond getting to the bottom floor of the tower. An FAQ is nearly essential to progress.

The game plays differently from other Rogue-likes, as it's viewed from the first-person perspective, at least in the initial release on the Saturn and PlayStation, which only came out in Japan. In other words, it's a little more like FromSoftware's *King's Field*. The random generation can be brutal, often failing to drop essential items. At the beginning of each run, though, you're granted an Angelic Rifle; it can kill almost anything, but you're only given five shots. In addition to your health, your vitality is constantly draining, forcing you to keep killing enemies to restore it, and hunt down the floor exit as quickly as possible.

The aesthetics are where *Baroque* truly comes into its own, as it's something like *Shin Megami Tensei* by way of *Silent Hill*. The monsters, based on tarot cards, are mostly bizarre, distorted demons, and many levels of the tower resemble dilapidated factories. You also devour bones and flesh to restore your health. It's surreal and horrific in ways that most actual survival horror games aren't, and that alone makes it essential.

The PlayStation 2/Wii remake came out in English, courtesy of Atlus. This release shifts the perspective from first to third person, though the action is clumsy in both versions. The graphics are cleaner, though the dark, unpolished grit of the older 32-bit versions worked to their benefit. The music in the first release, by Masaharu Iwata, is brilliantly grim, while the replacement soundtrack in the remake, by Shigeki Hayashi, doesn't quite match up, though it's still quite good. Overall, the remake is easier to play, but feels like it's missing something. The original version was a cult classic in Japan, with tons of tie-in goods, including a prequel visual novel called *Baroque Syndrome*.

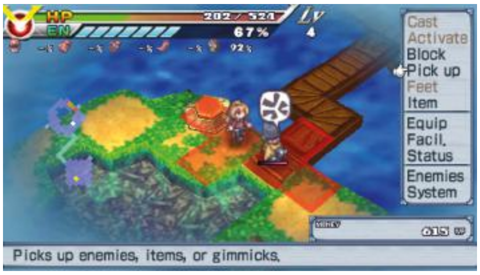


Z.H.P. Unlosing Ranger vs. Darkdeath Evilman

Developer: Nippon Ichi | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): PSP

Nippon Ichi is known for SRPGs containing oddball humour and eccentric mechanics; when they decided to apply these to the Rogue-like sub-genre, the result was the absurdly titled *Z.H.P. Unlosing Ranger vs. Darkdeath Evilman*. The good guy of the title is meant to face off against the bad guy, except he's hit by a car on the way to the fight, and ends up bequeathing his title to a random kid he meets, which happens to be you. As the new Unlosing Ranger, you are sent to Bizarro Earth, where you train with a bunny hat-wearing girl named Etranger to become strong enough for the climactic fight against Darkdeath. These missions take the form of randomised dungeons full of monsters and treasures, where you have to keep yourself fed, or else start losing health and eventually starve to death, and in which perishing isn't the end of the game, but sends you back out without your items or levels. That is to say, it's the same kind of "permadeath lite" as in the *Mystery Dungeon* series.

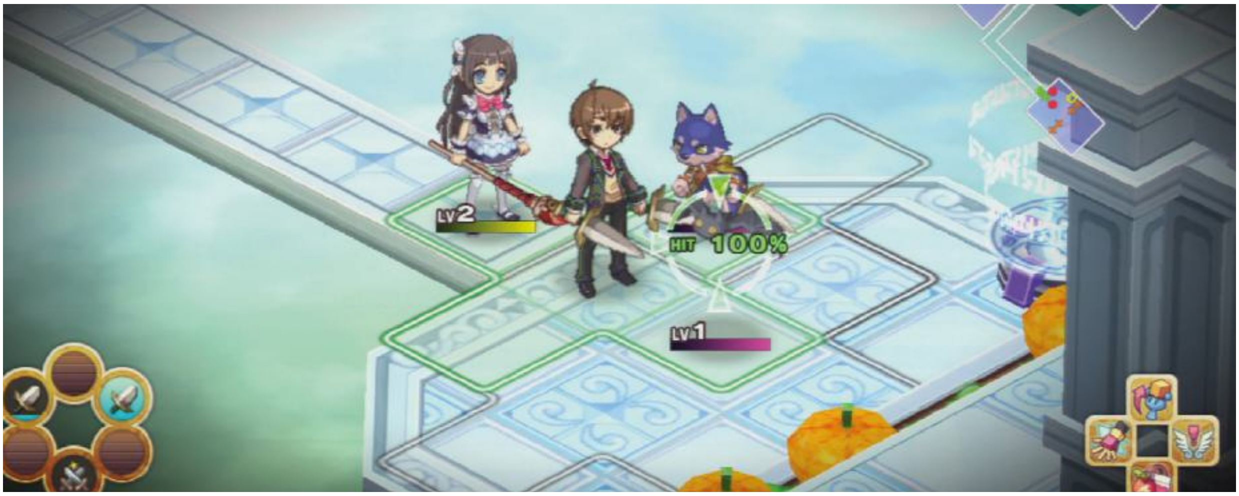
Each dungeon scenario has you dealing with the problem of someone on Bizarro Earth. The lives of each of these people are connected, in the way of parallel worlds, with someone on Earth, specifically someone who was demoralised by watching the utter defeat of Unlosing Ranger on TV. By solving their problem (by defeating the dungeon), you end up restoring the resolve of the people on Earth. Along the way, you gain a new ability with which to fight Darkdeath; you are then sent back to Earth to try the fight again, but end up getting defeated again, and so return to Bizarro Earth for more training. Each cycle is represented as akin to an episode of an anime series. The script is quite silly, and there are cameos from other Nippon Ichi characters, as well as tie-ins from assorted manga and anime properties.



In the Nippon Ichi style, there are multiple other game systems to engage with. Enemies can be picked up and chucked around the levels. While technically you'll start out every dungeon at level 0, every time you complete an area, you'll increase your base stats, so in fact you'll always be getting stronger. Additionally, any items brought back to base after a successful run are kept, and can be reused, or sold to get money to purchase more stuff in subsequent runs. All of your weapons have a Condition stat that goes down with use. They must be repaired before reuse, but you can chuck broken pieces of equipment at enemies, eat them, or use them to increase your base stats. As usual in this type of game, you need to manage your hunger meter, which depletes both as you explore and outside the dungeons. Not only does the meter go down quickly, but all your special attack moves also produce hunger. You get hungry quickly if you carry around enemies, and if you wield two weapons simultaneously.

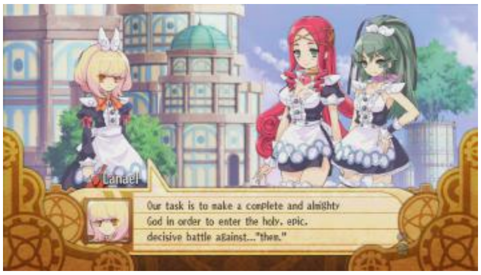
All of these subsystems can be overwhelming if you prefer straight dungeon crawling, but if you enjoyed mini-games like *Disgaea*'s Dark Assembly and Item Worlds, it might be for you. There is a lot of character customisation, and it's very approachable, even for those not usually into Rogue-likes.

Z.H.P. stands for *Zettai Hero Project*, which is Nippon Ichi's take on a *Mystery Dungeon*-style game, complete with a ridiculous story and abundant subsystems.



The Guided Fate Paradox (series)

Developer: Nippon Ichi | Released: 2013 | Platform(s): PS3



Our task is to make a complete and almighty God in order to enter the holy, epic, decisive battle against..."them."

PS3
The Guided Fate
PARADOX

Two more Rogue-likes from Nippon Ichi, one a definite successor to *Z.H.P.*, the other a storyline sequel that oversimplifies to the point of dullness.

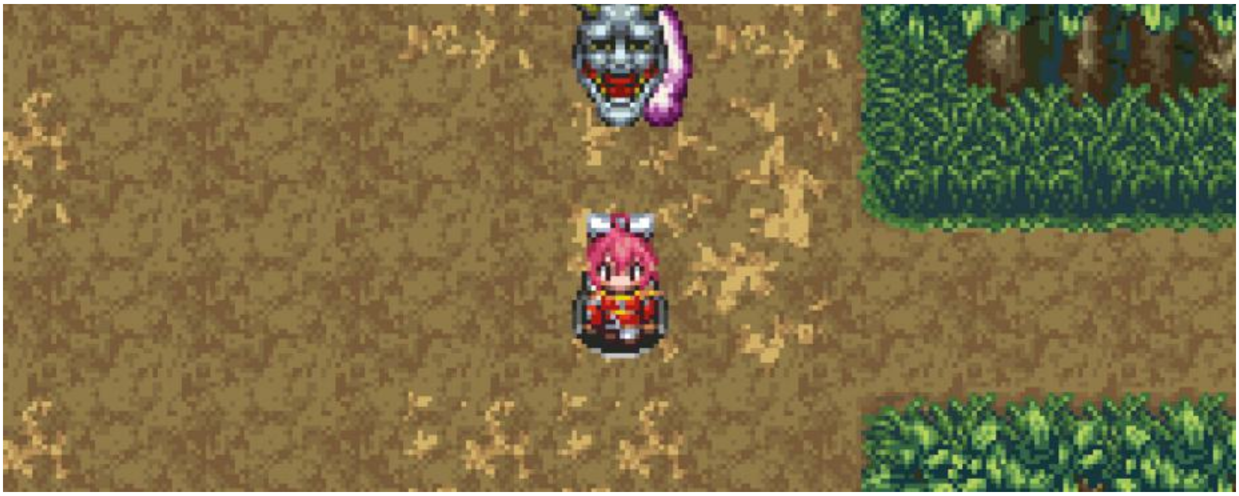
Despite their occasional reliance on their flagship *Disgaea* franchise, Nippon Ichi is often keen to change stories or characters in their games, even if they share mechanics. As follow-ups to *Z.H.P.*, they created two more Rogue-likes for the PlayStation 3, technically separate games but with similar themes: *The Guided Fate Paradox*, and *The Awakened Fate Ultimatum*, each with more curious takes on the inner workings of heaven.

The Guided Fate Paradox, much like *Z.H.P.*, stars a random kid thrown into extraordinary circumstances – this time, it's average kid Renya Kagurazaka, who wins a mall lottery and ends up being promoted to godhood in the angelic world of Celestia. As the new Lord, he must respond to the wishes of various people, some of which are quite silly – for example, the first area has you fixing up a version of Cinderella who's become disillusioned with her story. In the course of the story, you'll also meet with the demons of the underworld, led by Satanael.

The game plays pretty much like *Z.H.P.*, with a few enhancements and tweaks. In most areas, you're accompanied by an angel companion, who walks alongside you and attacks automatically. As you progress through the game, you unlock more and more of them to help out. Additionally, rather than items getting broken after use, instead they Burst – this still decreases their effectiveness, but when it happens, you get a holy icon panel which can be used to upgrade your characters on a board called a Divinigram, plus the broken item can be taken to a blacksmith to be simultaneously fixed and enhanced. Altogether, a nicely refined entry.

This was followed up the next year with *The Awakened Fate Ultimatum*. While it is technically a sequel from a plot standpoint, it's also much less loopy than a typical Nippon Ichi game. Hero Shin Kamikaze gets murdered, but is saved by angels, and ends up in Celestia as God (again). However, while the story still revolves around the battle between angels and devils, it removes the part about solving problems with various other humans.

In fact, despite the storyline connections, there's quite a lot here that's different from its predecessor. While both *Z.H.P.* and *The Guided Fate Paradox* featured an isometric view, with 2D sprites on 3D backgrounds, à la *Disgaea*, the new game uses an overhead perspective and super-deformed polygonal models. While it's easier to control, it also looks much cheaper. Many of the unique mechanics – the angel partners, the Bursting, and so forth – are gone. Instead, Shin can Deitize by shifting from his regular human form into Angel and Devil transformations. Most enemies are also classified as angels or devils, so you can switch to the opposing class to do more damage. However, staying in either form will also suck down SP. When gaining levels or making various moral choices, you can also gain Crystal Points that let you upgrade the two forms. Overall, this entry is a little too stripped back compared to its predecessors, and its more serious tone doesn't entirely work.



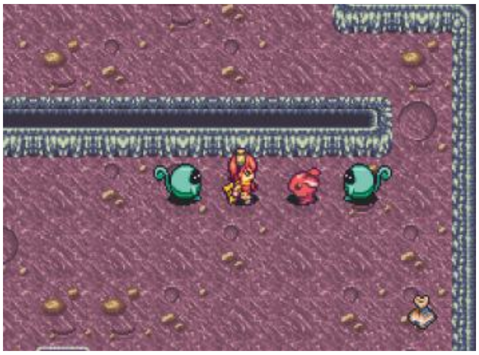
Izuna (series)

Developer: Ninja Studio Ltd. | Released: 2006 | Platform(s): DS

Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja is one of the games inspired by *Mystery Dungeon*. The story goes that Izuna and her ninja clan were kicked out of their old castle as the age of ninjas was ending; while wandering, she offended local gods who consequently caused the other members of her clan to behave oddly. In the way of these games, Izuna must go hunt down the gods and beat them up in order to put things back in order. In game terms, this means exploring a series of randomised dungeons, like those in the *Mystery Dungeon* series. *Izuna* dungeons are laid out more chaotically, but tend to have fewer rooms.

The graphics and sound are pretty good (the main theme is catchy), but the core of a Rogue-like is in its gameplay. Izuna doesn't reset to square one when she falls in a dungeon, but keeps her experience levels. This tends to mean later dungeons are designed around a higher-levelled protagonist, which in turn means Izuna sometimes has to grind for experience in earlier dungeons, which is a bit annoying.

Izuna makes a number of changes to the *Mystery Dungeon* formula. Food is gone, replaced by an SP meter. SP depletes over time, and when Izuna is hit by monsters and reads Talisman items. Running out of SP isn't fatal, but Izuna's attack power does drop substantially as it decreases. It is regained by using Likeness items. Among magic items, the most important class is Talismans, which can be either read, thrown, or attached to equipment. All equipment in the game has a durability, roughly as in *Fire Emblem*, that goes down with use, and also a maximum Capacity for attached Talismans. Each Talisman has an SP value, and if the total SP stuck to a weapon exceeds its capacity, its durability will be drastically reduced. *Izuna* is also different from *Mystery Dungeon* games in that traps can affect monsters, and Izuna can lay caltrops and bombs to slow and attack foes.



Sadly, one problem with *Izuna*'s design is that Talismans, while often useful to read, weaken the heroine, by greatly decreasing her SP when they're used as an escape or for a power play. The most powerful Talismans are not just rare but also costly to use, and this upsets the traditional Rogue-like play balance somewhat. However, there's also stuff to like in the game: the differences do make it play differently from just another *Rogue* variant, and some of the monsters (especially Froggun) are interesting.

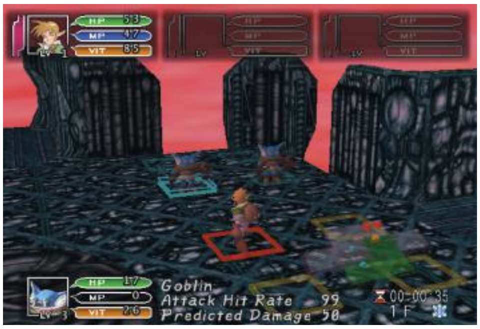
The game did get a sequel, *Izuna 2: The Unemployed Ninja Returns*, which adds in a tag system, enabling you to switch between Izuna and other, newly playable, characters. Both Izuna and her friend Shiho are also playable characters in the DS fighting game *Windy X Windam*, another Ninja Studio game, published shortly before the company closed down.

NINTENDO DS
Izuna

The character art for *Izuna* definitely plays up the heroine's sexiness, though there's little of this present in-game.

Time Stalkers

Developer: Climax Entertainment | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): DC



TIME STALKERS
SEGA

While some characters may seem familiar for SEGA fans, the Rogue-like gameplay of *Time Stalkers* took most gamers by surprise.

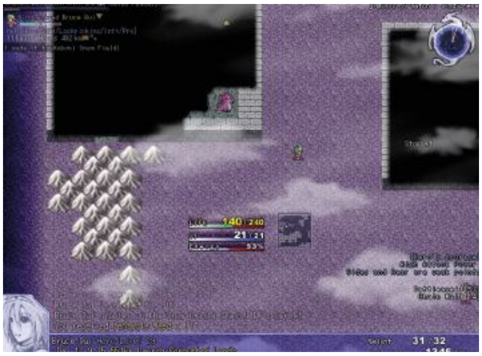
Time Stalkers is known as *Climax Landers* in Japan, a more appropriate title, since it's a crossover game, featuring characters from the developer Climax. The game includes Nigel from *Landstalker,* Lady from *Lady Stalker,* and Pyra from *Shining in the Darkness,* as well as a few original characters, including blue-haired, red-caped hero Sword, beastman Rao, and living doll Marion. The character designs are by regular Climax artist Yoshitaka Tamaki.

However, this game is unlike the company's previous output in that it's a Rogue-like. You pick one of these characters, then head into one of several dungeons, starting at level one and facing a new layout every time you enter. Once you beat the dungeon's boss, then you can continue with the story, though there are also sub-quests and randomly dropped loot to find. The battle system is different from other Japanese Rogue-likes though, as when you find an enemy, the game switches to a more traditional turn-based battle system, in which the sides trade blows. While you only control one main character when exploring a dungeon, you can also capture monsters to fill up the remaining two party slots. In addition to your vitality, which determines the types of attacks you can use, you need to monitor your hunger. There are also VMU mini-games, including one featuring Jogurt from the *Shining Force* games.

When it was released in English, *Time Stalkers* was widely met with disappointment, since it was nothing like *Landstalker* or *Shining Force.* Outside of the fan service elements, it's a rather tedious title, with boring, drab dungeon designs and a thin story.

One Way Heroics

Developer: SmokingWOLF | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): WIN, PS4



One Way Heroics

***One Way Heroics* is an indie success story, having achieved commercial success.**

The Rogue-like sub-genre received a revitalisation in the early 2010s, largely thanks to the popularity of the indie hit *Spelunky*. The result was many variations on the formula, weaving elements of *Rogue* into different genres. *One Way Heroics* is a particularly unique one, because it's both very traditional and extremely progressive, and comes from Japanese developer SmokingWOLF.

Darkness is overshadowing the land, and your job, as the hero, is to outrun its shadows in your quest to defeat evil. While on a basic level it plays similarly to previous Japanese Rogue-likes – you move by squares, attack in a turn-based fashion, manage hunger, and grab loot – you're not exploring a dungeon but rather adventuring across an expansive field. Every turn, the darkness creeps closer, scrolling the screen to the right and forcing you forward, hence the "one-way" of the title. If the darkness catches you, you die immediately. The result is a fast-paced, intensely focused game that can be enjoyed in quick bites. Depending on your performance, you can also unlock aspects for future playthroughs, including stat perks, character classes, and abilities, plus a feature to carry forward selected items to subsequent runs. While the stages are randomly generated, they can be given titles if you want to revisit them.

The game was an indie success, resulting in Spike-Chunsoft remaking it, and releasing it as *Mystery Chronicle: One Way Heroics,* officially making it part of the *Mystery Dungeon* series. However, various changes, like the implementation of traps, a worse soundtrack, and a lousy frame rate, have made it unpopular with fans.

SHOP

Monster-Collecting RPGs

Typically, role-playing games had a pretty clear line between party members, who the player controlled, and enemies, who mostly exist to either attack or be demolished by said party members. But, what if those enemies could be convinced to give up their evil ways and cross over to become a playable character?

This concept can be seen at least as early as Atlus' Famicom dungeon crawler *Megami Tensei*, in which the player can talk various mythological demons and creatures into joining their team. However, this was primarily a series for older, more hardcore RPG players; the idea was more widely popularised, at least in Japan, by *Dragon Quest V*, a series with a much broader audience. Again, the hero has the ability to communicate with monsters, some of whom could offer to join your team after combat.

This culminated in the release of *Pocket Monsters* (contracted to *Pokémon* for its international release), initially released in 1996 for the Nintendo Game Boy. This time, monster-collecting wasn't just one part of the game, it was the entire focus. The concept was wildly popular, creating a multimedia franchise that eventually spanned decades of anime and manga, not to mention toys, trading card games, and plushies. And with that level of popularity came numerous imitators.

Since *Pokémon* was targetted at kids, many of these similar games headed for the same audience. Thus, the types of monster the player hunts for are the cute, marketable kind, as opposed to the actual, more threatening monsters you'd see in typical RPGs. Indeed, part of the idea is that the monsters in these games aren't actually all that threatening, they're just wild animals (or owned by other characters), so functionally they're more like toys or pets that just happen to fight on your behalf. Additionally, most of these games appear on portable platforms, again, to appeal to the target market, and give kids a way to play these time-consuming games without having to fight their parents or siblings for the TV. Finally, many of them also have tie-in media or merchandise – cynically done to generate more income for the IP holder, but also helping to flesh out the world beyond the constraints of a video game.

There are also competitive and social angles involved with these games. While many RPGs are solitary experiences, even the early *Pokémon* Game Boy games let you trade monsters with anyone else who owned the game, provided you had a link cable. Beyond adventuring through the story mode to become the best Pokémon Trainer in the land, you could also battle your friends competitively, giving you even more incentive to find and train your stable into the strongest around.

These games also tend to be a little simple because, again, they're meant for children, many of whom are of primary school age and are still learning to read. Still, that simplicity can be charming, so open-minded adults can still find themselves lured into their worlds, whether playing alone or with their kids. Play also acts as a introduction to Japanese role-playing in general, so young 'uns may cut their teeth on *Pokémon* before moving onto other series such as *Final Fantasy*, *Dragon Quest*, or *Persona*.

Exploring the world and hunting for critters to join your team is the key element to monster-collecting RPGs.

PIKACHU♀
Lv3
HP

Pokémon (series)

Developer: Nintendo/Game Freak | Released: 1996 | Platform(s): GB, GBC, GBA, DS, 3DS, NSW

Urbanisation was a concern in Japan during the ’80s and ’90s, as many rural and natural areas turned into concrete jungles, disrupting the local ecology. These changes were not lost on Satoshi Tajiri, who had spent a fair amount of his youth collecting bugs, considered at one time to be a significant part of an ideal boyhood in Japanese culture. With the displacement of the natural by the manmade, Tajiri noticed the decline of insect populations and wondered about the future of children, as many were spending more time indoors than out. Having run a gaming magazine called *Game Freak* that wrote about secrets and easter eggs in games, and eventually turned into a game development company of the same name (partnered throughout by illustrator Ken Sugimori), Tajiri devised the idea of collecting insects in a video game. With the launch of Nintendo’s Game Boy, Tajiri observed the functionality of the link cable and envisioned the little bugs of the game crawling across them as children traded creatures, as he often had. Around that time, Squaresoft released *Makai Toushi SaGa,* which the West received as *Final Fantasy Legend.* Having thoroughly demonstrated that a slower-paced, thoughtful, and complex game could succeed on the portable, this hit release inspired Tajiri to do the same. His little creatures were known as Pocket Monsters in Japan, abbreviated to Pokémon in English.

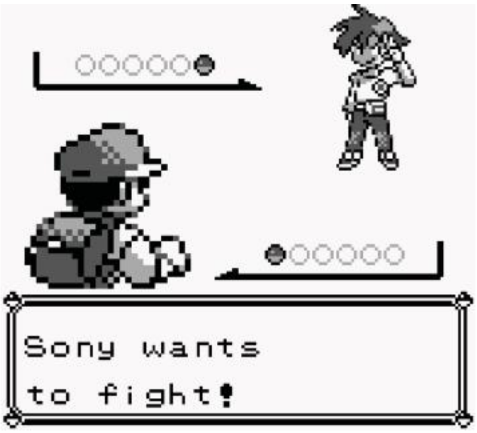
Excuse me!
You looked at me, didn’t you?

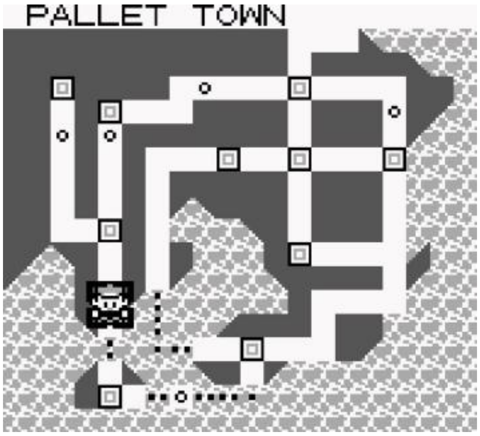
POKéMON
FIRERED VERSION
GAME BOY ADVANCE

The *Pokémon* games are divided into generations, each with two or more releases. Additionally, some entries have been remade. Highlighted here is *Pokémon FireRed,* a Game Boy Advance remake of *Pokémon Red.*

Tajiri’s original pitch to Nintendo left many of the decision makers unable to really follow his vision, as nothing of the kind had ever been done before. Despite guidance from Shigeru Miyamoto, the game faced a very long development time, with near-bankruptcy looming over Game Freak so often that it repeatedly had to put the *Pokémon* project on hold to work on side projects, such as *Yoshi* and *Mario & Wario* for Nintendo, and *Pulseman* for SEGA. During this period, Miyamoto suggested splitting the game into two versions, with some creatures exclusive to each, to encourage the trading aspect that Tajiri had seen as a priority. In 1996, six years after development began, the *Red* and *Green* versions *of Pocket Monsters* were released on Game Boy in Japan. Initial sales weren’t encouraging, but steadily increased due to word of mouth, heralding the success of Satoshi Tajiri’s manmade-bug collection game.

The titular Pokémon span a wide variety of creatures; some are clearly animal substitutions while others take the form of animated objects or embodiments of mythical creatures. Each creature has up to two Types (out of 15) that represent their dominant characteristics. For example, regular animals are often classified as Normal Type, while marine life in varying forms has the Water Type. Pikachu, the series’ primary mascot, is an Electric Type. Every Pokémon has its own list of battle Moves it can learn, with each Move also corresponding to a Type. Types interact in a fairly logical fashion;


Sony wants to fight!



GAME BOY
POKéMON
BLUE VERSION

Pokémon Red and _Blue_ are the first versions of the game, released for the Game Boy, in which you control a young boy from Pallet Town as he ventures through the world of Pokémon.

Fire, for example, is effective against Grass and Ice, but less useful against Water. So, if a Move is used against a creature with a Type it has an interaction with, the Move's damage will be increased or decreased accordingly. In the case of dual-type Pokémon, both types are taken into consideration. This easily understood series of complex interactions is at the core of why the game's battles are both approachable and engaging, regardless of age-group.

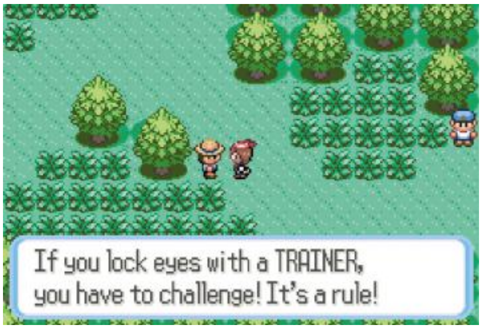
The naming conventions for the series are quite confusing. The main games are broken down into eight generations, each having at least two versions, differing only in small ways, typically the specific Pokémon contained on the cartridge. The idea was not that you'd need to buy two games, but rather that you'd trade Pokémon with someone who had another title from that generation. There are sometimes third releases within each gen, with a variety of enhancements. Some generations have also been remade using newer technology. For example, the first generation exists both as the original trilogy of Game Boy games (*Red*, *Blue*, and *Yellow*), a pair of Game Boy Advance remakes (*FireRed* and *LeafGreen*) and another set of HD remakes for the Switch (*Let's Go Pikachu* and *Eevee*).

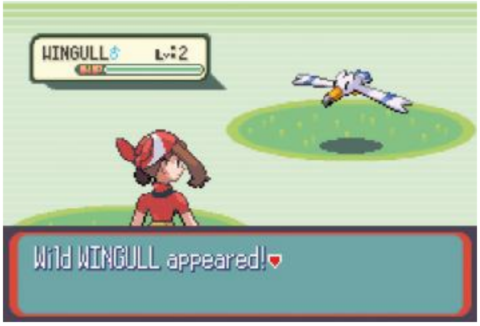
Pokémon Red and *Green*, the first generation, set the structure that is used in all the games: players will meet with a local Professor and be provided a starter Pokémon of either Grass, Water or Fire Types while a Rival character will typically choose the creature that has advantage over the player's. From there, you will encounter wild Pokémon in the grass; yours battles these, and, through the use of the iconic Pokéball, you can attempt to catch them to add to your roster or collection. Many creatures can evolve, if a condition (such as reaching a particular experience level) is met, usually changing to larger and more powerful creatures. Other Pokémon trainers exist in the world and will challenge the player to a battle on sight; trained Pokémon are stronger than wild ones, and the player cannot attempt to run or catch them. Should the player succeed in winning a Trainer battle, they will receive money with which to purchase Pokéballs, and other RPG essentials, such as healing items.

Broadly, the games follow a structure in which eight successful (Badge-winning) battles with Pokémon League Gym Leaders lead to the next stage, in which you advance to the Pokémon League proper; here you will challenge the Elite Four and the Champion. However, arguably the greater goal is to fill out the Pokédex, which keeps track of every Pokémon you meet and capture. Over the course of this journey you will get tangled up in contending with local criminal activity: Team Rocket, in the first games, and assorted other Teams later on, are intent on using Pokémon for cruel or unjust purposes. There are also encounters with your Rival, who can show up without warning, and start a difficult battle.

In Japan, after the initial *Red* and *Green* versions were published, a *Blue* version was released by mail-order later that year, featuring

Pokémon Ruby and _Sapphire_ are part of the third generation, and the first to be released for the Game Boy Advance.


If you lock eyes with a TRAINER,
you have to challenge! It's a rule!



Wild WINGULL appeared!

GAME BOY ADVANCE
POKéMON
RUBY VERSION

Are you a boy?
Or a girl?

Purrloin Lv.7
HP
Estefano Lv.8
HP
25/28

More!
Let me hear the voice of your Pokémon!

NINTENDO DS
Pokémon
BLACK

The DS entries are considered by many fans to be the high point of the series, particularly the *Black/White* duology, part of the fifth generation.

updated sprites and additional dialogue. Rather than release three games in the West, Nintendo made some changes to them so only two, *Red* and *Blue*, saw English release. Owing to the perception that Westerners disliked cute things, the reason that so much U.S. box art is revised to look more angry and brutish, the question arose as to whether to give similar treatment to the Pokémon themselves. The President of Nintendo at the time, Hiroshi Yamauchi, ultimately decided against this, considering the matter to be a challenge to overcome in the West. Considering how many people fawn over cute creatures, regardless of nationality, it can safely be said that he made the right call. A *Yellow* version was eventually released, in which the player's starter was a Pikachu with digitised voice clips that walks behind the player's character.

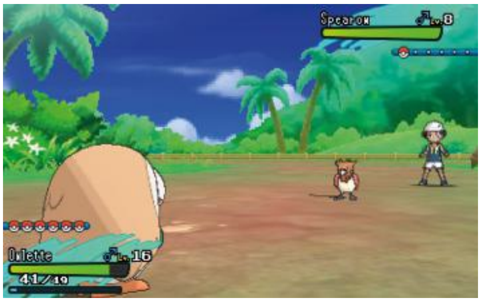
The first-generation games have been remade twice, with *FireRed* and *LeafGreen* on the Game Boy Advance, operating like the third-generation games, and *Let's Go Pikachu/Eevee* on the Switch, changing the wild Pokémon encounters to include motion controls, and removing the battles, so instead you just throw a Pokéball.

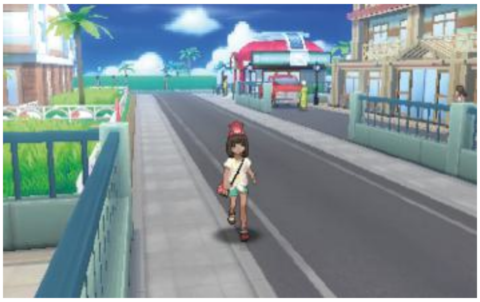
The second generation debuted on the Game Boy Color in 1999, with *Gold* and *Silver* taking place in Johto, which was inspired by the Japanese Kansai region, and *Crystal* following a year later, allowing you to play as a girl for the first time in the series. These took advantage of the Game Boy Color's internal clock and have a day/night cycle, with some Pokémon being diurnal and others nocturnal. In addition to this, it's possible to breed certain creatures to generate baby versions that will evolve into more familiar forms. The ability for Pokémon to hold given items, such as berries to eat in battle or mail to carry when traded, was added. Two new Types, Dark and Steel, were added. The next President of Nintendo, Satoru Iwata, famously saved the project by providing development tools and compression methods that gave the team so much space they were able to fit the entire landscape of the original game into it; this was retroactively named Kanto, after the region in Japan. *Gold* and *Silver* were remade on the DS as *HeartGold* and *SoulSilver*, using the fourth-generation rules.

The third-generation games were released on the Game Boy Advance in 2002 as *Ruby* and *Sapphire*, set in the Hoenn region, which is based on the island of Kyushu, the follow-up version this time being *Emerald*. While the second-generation games focused on the passage of time, these games focus on weather, habitat, and a lot of horns in the soundtrack. New to the mechanical end of things are Abilities for the Pokémon, passive traits that help them stand out and perform more complex strategies. Generation three also introduces Double Battles, in which the player will deploy two creatures at once, against two opposing creatures, though the majority of the game is still played with singles. Finally, Pokémon Contests have been introduced, allowing participants to compete based on looks and moods rather than battles. Using sixth-generation rules, *Alpha Sapphire* and *Omega Ruby* were released on the Nintendo 3DS.

The fourth-generation games were *Diamond* and *Pearl* on the Nintendo DS, in 2006, with the updated version *Platinum* to follow, which were set in the Sinnoh region (based on Hokkaido). The big innovation this time around was online connectivity, allowing internet-based, or even local, trades and battles between players, all without the use of a link cable. On the gameplay front, the fourth generation mostly saw revisions of older rules. Previously, a Move's relevant stats were governed by the Type associated with it, such as Fire being Special and Poison being Attack. This generation diversified things by introducing Physical, Special and Status attributes for Moves, allowing for more variety in strategy and improving the usability of some creatures. The two screens afforded by the device allow for the use of the Pokétch when roaming around, with various useful and novel functions that sadly were never replicated in any of the later games.

Black and *White* were the fifth-generation Pokémon games, this time with a stronger emphasis on the story; with that in mind, this generation was followed by a narrative *Part 2* taking place a year later, rather than merely an updated version of the game. Taking place in the Unova region, which was inspired by New York and New Jersey, the fifth-generation games are seen as something of an attempt to reinvent the series. *Black* and *White* are loaded with many quality-of-life enhancements too numerous to list. Of particular note are the animated battle sprites,





Pokémon SUN
NINTENDO 3DS

Even though they aren't quite as popular with long-time fans, the later 3D entries included some interesting locales, like the tropical islands of Alola, based on Hawaii.

Triple and Rotation Battles, and 150 new creatures. This was the only game, excluding the first generation, to add so many at once, also having older ones only available in the post-game. They also had a unique online support system called the Pokémon Dream World, which allowed a player to obtain exclusive Pokémon with hidden Abilities, though support for this has long since terminated.

The sixth-generation games, *X* and *Y*, found themselves on the Nintendo 3DS, and were set in the Kalos region, which is reminiscent of France, particularly around Paris. They feature fully 3D polygonal graphics, making the battles reminiscent of the console battle-oriented *Pokémon Stadium* games. The big addition this time around is the inclusion of the 18th Type, Fairy. Further, it's now possible to customise player-characters, involving details like clothing, hair style/colour and even skin complexion. The other new point of interest is Mega Evolution. At the cost of giving up the Mega Stone slot, certain creatures can evolve for the duration of a battle, often gaining greater stats and potent Abilities.

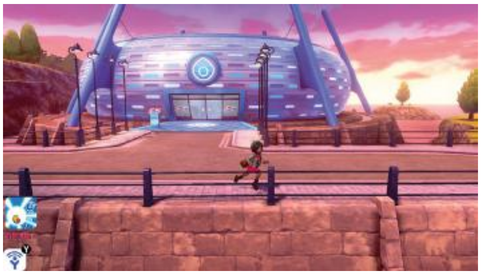
The seventh generation continued on the Nintendo 3DS, with *Sun* and *Moon*, which in turn received tune-ups with *Ultra Sun* and *Ultra Moon*. These take place on the islands of Alola, based on Hawaii. *Sun* and *Moon* deviate from the usual eight-gyms structure, instead offering trials for nearly every Type. Mechanically, the new attempt to shake up the gameplay comes in the form of Z-Shards, which are held by a creature, and when activated will change a Move once in the fight. The bottom screen is now in permanent use as a mini-map and all online functions are handled in a rather clumsy theme park of the player's design.

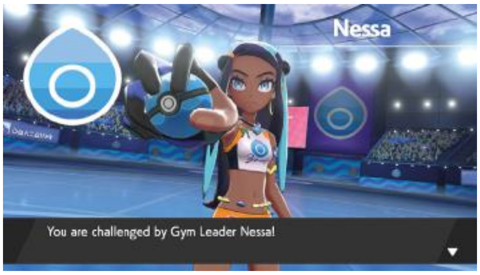
Taking place in the United Kingdom-inspired Galar region, the eighth-generation games are *Sword* and *Shield*. Bringing several modern gaming concepts to the main series, *Sword* and *Shield* feature free-roaming explorable areas, optional side quests for experience and prizes, and Raids, in which multiple players must team up to contend with a major opponent. Kaijuu-sized Pokémon exist, and can be used by the player through a process known as Dynamaxing. However, the issues with upgrading all of the 3D models to HD resulted in large swathes of the Pokémon being cut.

Of course, the sheer number of these games invites the question: which generation is the best? Most of the games are pretty similar, in spite of technological advancements. It's a complicated answer, as fans will often point to either the ones with their favourite rosters of Pokémon, or simply the first entry they played. However, broadly speaking, the fanbase tends to like the DS (the fourth and fifth) generations the best, if mostly because Game Freak never quite adapted to 3D development, so the later titles feel a little stripped back. Plus, they tend to feature more story scenes and lots of dialogue, despite not having much of anything interesting to say. Indeed, the storylines are simple, since the games are still meant for children. It does open the series to criticism, as it doesn't evolve much, but that's also what its many imitators are for.

Beyond the core games, there are countless spinoffs across different genres. The quality of these is inconsistent, since they are outsourced to other developers, though the *Pokémon Mystery Dungeon* series of Rogue-likes is one of the better ones. Plus, at this point, there are decades' worth of manga, television shows, movies and other outlets. Most of the TV anime are based on game entries, although the main character through the years has been the young boy Ash Ketchum, whose design is based on the trainer from the first generation.

Pokémon Sword and _Shield_ take place in Galar, inspired by Great Britain. This is the first HD entry in the series, and it's clear that it had some growing pains.





You are challenged by Gym Leader Nessa!

Pokémon SWORD

Digimon Story (series)

Developer: MediaVision/Beck | Released: 2003 | Platform(s): DS, PSP, PSV, PS4, NSW, WIN

Nokia

It was something like KICKS or LIPS or whatever.

PS4
DIGIMON STORY CYBER SLEUTH

***Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth* was the first game in the series since the DS days, and it's been modernised quite a bit, to compete with the rather conservative *Pokémon* games.**

Though it has never gained the mainstream popularity of the rival *Pokémon* franchise, *Digimon* has become a respectable multimedia entity since it first appeared as a virtual pet toy in the '90s. The main difference from *Pokémon* lies in the designs of the "digital monsters"; they can also talk. Now encompassing anime, manga, films, card games, and video games, the series has garnered a substantial following. The video game series has included titles in multiple genres, ranging from monster-raising through arena-style fighting to open-world exploration.

Of the games, which have included various tie-ins to the anime series and involve a significant amount of time spent with the character Ryo, the most established sub-series has been the digital pet-raising *World* games, and the role-playing *Story* titles.

So far, there have been eight games in the *Story* series. Across all of these games, regardless of platform, there are commonalities: the player controls a Digimon Tamer of some sort, in a third-person perspective. Their primary responsibility is to raise up a team of Digimon to take on whatever antagonistic force is present. Players can have three active Digimon in their party at once, with more available for substitution mid-battle. Battles take place in a turn-based format, with the next Digimon's turn visible on screen. Players can evolve their Digimon along various potential branches, depending on their stats and level, and Digimon can gain experience outside of battle through the use of a Digi-Farm.

The first *Digimon Story* title, as it was known in Japan, was released in North America as *Digimon World DS*, in spite of it having no connection to the *World* games – Bandai had opted to roll with this branding, as English speakers were already familiar with it. The game was released in 2006 for the Nintendo DS, with the player in control of a Digimon Tamer. The existence of Digimon has been covered up by the DATS organisation (from the *Digimon Savers* anime series), and it's up to the protagonist to explore the Digital World and face off against the villainous Unknown-D.

Digimon World DS was positively received in both America and Japan, with the deep Digimon evolution management system being hailed as a high point. The game was also noted for being worth playing for any RPG fan, regardless of their interest in the *Digimon* franchise. The success of *Digimon World DS* led to the development and release of *Digimon World Dusk* and *Digimon World Dawn* (known in Japan as *Digimon Story Sunburst* and *Digimon Story Moonlight*) in 2007.

This pair of games follows the same main plot: a virus has caused a terrible earthquake to occur in both the Sunshine and Darkmoon districts, with each district blaming the other for the incident. In *Dawn*, the player is a Tamer on the Light Fang team, while in *Dusk* they belong to the Night Crow team. Regardless of the title, the player raises up a new team of Digimon to uncover what's really behind the ongoing tremors. The differences between the titles involve primarily which areas are open to exploration.

Sappho

"At the bottom lies, a secret, hidden world"

14
18
Victory Condition
30 points
Turn 16
Erika

PS4
DIGIMON STORY CYBER SLEUTH
HACKER'S MEMORY

***Hacker's Memory* is a half-sequel that adds several new Digimon to the roster.**

The games received lukewarm responses, and it'd be eight years before another *Digimon Story* game made it out of Japan.

But in those years, three more *Story* games came out in Japan: *Digimon Story: Lost Evolution*, *Digimon Story: Super Xros Wars Red*, and *Digimon Story: Super Xros Wars Blue*. The latter two were another paired story that was based on the *Digimon Xros Wars* anime series airing at the time. *Lost Evolution* featured an original story, in which the character Shu (male) or Kizuna (female) is transported into the Digital World. There, they find their classmates and other kids, who all team up, along with their Digimon, to help take down a trio of villains named Uno, Dos, and Tres. Despite a pretty positive reception in Japan, it didn't get an English release at all.

It wasn't until 2016 that the *Digimon Story* franchise was finally released internationally under that name, its debut being *Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth*. This is basically a soft reboot aimed at a slightly older audience. It tosses out all of the old main characters, and takes place in near-future Tokyo, though familiar Digimon are still present. New aspects include character designs from Suzuhito Yasuda, who had previously done artwork for the Japan-only PSP game *Digimon World Re:Digitize*, and whose other notable work includes *Durarara!!* and *Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor*. Music for this game and its sequel was by Masafumi Takada, who had also composed for *killer7*, *No More Heroes* and other Grasshopper Manufacture games.

The player controls either Takumi (male) or Ami (female) Aiba. This protagonist is a student who uses an online virtual reality space known as EDEN. One day, while logged into EDEN, they end up confronted by a corrupted data creature known as an Eater, which consumes part of their data and leaves them in a half-digital state. After being found by the detective Kyoko Kuremi, Aiba is hired by Kuremi to help solve digital crimes that have been perpetrated by nefarious hackers using Digimon, or by Digimon themselves. As Aiba solves these cases, a deeper plot becomes evident, engendered by Kamishiro Enterprises, the company behind EDEN. This eventually puts you and numerous other Digimon trainers into conflict with Yggdrasil (or King Drasil in the localisation), a digital god.

A companion title to this game was released shortly afterwards. *Digimon Story: Cyber Sleuth – Hacker's Memory*, which follows Keisuke Amasawa, who has his EDEN account stolen in a phishing attack and ends up framed for a crime. He joins up with the hacker group known as Hudie to get his account back, and ends up caught up in the Eater incidents himself. *Hacker's Memory* added 92 more Digimon to the game's roster, and though the game's story overlaps on occasion with that of *Cyber Sleuth*, it's considered a side story (NPC characters even call Keisuke a "side character" to his face).

Both of these games play pretty much the same, with a standard turn-based battle system, though Digimon can link up for combo attacks. Digimon are scanned automatically before battle, and when they hit 100%, they become available. You spend your time between the real world and the digital world, where the dungeons are. These games were developed with the Vita in mind, so they're a little simple when played on a console or computer, but the sleek and stylish cyberspace look is attractive, if somewhat repetitive. However, collecting and cultivating Digimon are easily their most compelling aspects.

Though not the blockbuster hit that is *Pokémon*, the *Digimon Story* games have proven to be a series of engaging role-playing outings that not only live up to the legacy of the *Digimon* franchise at large, but have amassed their own dedicated base of fans. They're also a decent alternative for those who want monster-collecting but something other than *Pokémon* or *Shin Megami Tensei*.

Attack
Enemy Turn

Dragon Quest Monsters (series)

Developer: Enix/Tose | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): GBC, PS1, GBA, DS, 3DS

While *Pokémon* was an international success, it was really *Dragon Quest V* on the Super Famicom that introduced the concept of monster-collecting into the mainstream, at least in Japan. Rather than letting Nintendo's series steal all of the thunder, Enix created its spinoff focused entirely on monster recruitment and battles.

The mechanics differ from entry to entry, but broadly, while you command a human hero, it's really only the monsters that actually participate in combat – three at a time in earlier entries, four later on. They level up like regular characters, and can also be bred together to create new offspring (an element which is more *Shin Megami Tensei* than *Pokémon*). You don't micro-manage battles, instead creating broad strategies, and your monsters comply (or not) depending on their level of loyalty, which can be strengthened in different ways. Monsters may join you randomly after you defeat them, as in *Dragon Quest V*.

The first *Dragon Quest Monsters* game was released for the Game Boy Color, and also came out in English. It stars a young version of Terry from *Dragon Quest VI*, whose sister Milayou (later known as Milly) has been kidnapped by monsters that jumped out of her drawer. Upon following her, he's whisked away to another world, where he must fight in a tournament to save her. The sequel was broken up into two games – *Cobi's Journey* and *Tara's Adventure* – which are mostly the same, other than having different protagonists and some different monsters. In this entry, they accidentally unplug the island of GreatLog, causing it to sink, so they must quest in search of a replacement. All of these entries have a central hub, along with randomly-generated sub-dungeons where you can find and battle monsters. All three games were combined into a single PlayStation upgrade, and also remade for the 3DS, though these are Japan-only.

The third game, subtitled *Caravan Heart* and released for the Game Boy Advance, stars a young Kiefer from *Dragon Quest VII*. This game is significantly different in that it focuses on adventuring by caravan. Each caravan is guarded by a monster, and can be customised with a variety of human riders of various classes who help with the fighting. Not only must you balance the weight of the caravans, but you must also manage food so you don't run out of supplies. The game also changes the breeding system: it now uses Monster Hearts, based on the monster class concept in *Dragon Quest VII*. Unlike the first two games, this was not released in English.

Then *Dragon Quest Monsters* began the *Joker* sub-series for the DS and 3DS, which is closer to the original Game Boy Color games, though these are in full 3D and do away with random battles in favour of visible encounters. They also use the skill point system from *Dragon Quest VIII*. The first two entries were localised, while an updated version of the second (subtitled *Professional*) and the third were Japan-only.

GAME BOY COLOR
DRAGON WARRIOR
MONSTERS 2
COBI'S JOURNEY

***Dragon Quest* was always filled with monsters so cute and/or weird that you felt bad smashing them, so a place where you became their friends made perfect sense.**

DemiKids / Devil Children (series)

Developer: Multimedia Intelligence Transfer/Atlus | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): GBC, GBA, PS1

While *Pokémon* introduced the concept of monster-collecting internationally, and *Dragon Quest* was the series that initially started it (at least in Japan), it was really Atlus' *Megami Tensei* series that originated the concept. Not wanting to feel left out, Atlus created its own spinoff series, which is basically *Shin Megami Tensei* for kids, called *Devil Children* in Japan, and later localised as *DemiKids* in North America.

As with *Pokémon*, most of the releases were split into two editions, which are mostly the same but differ in their protagonists (and partner demons), the selection of recruitable demons, and a few plot points. The initial releases in 2000 for the Game Boy Color, *Kuro no Sho* and *Aka no Sho* ("Black Book" and "Red Book", respectively) focus on two children, Setsuna and Mirai, in Harajuku, Tokyo, who each receive a mysterious package containing a gun called a Deviliser (known as a Demiloc in English) and a computer called a Vinecom. They are then called to explore the demon realm for various reasons. These games were combined and ported to the PlayStation. A sequel, *Shiro no Sho* ("White Book") focuses on a pair of young boys named Masaki and Takaharu, who get caught up in a war between angels and demons.

Another set of sequels appeared for the Game Boy Advance, which were translated into English as the *Light* and *Dark* versions. These feature children named Jin and Akira, who are called into the world of Valhalla to save it from mysterious time rifts. A Japan-only sequel, *Honoo no Sho* and *Koori no Sho* ("Book of Fire" and "Book of Ice") stars the same characters, but focuses on a war between Muspelheim and Niflheim, the worlds of fire and ice from Norse mythology.

Developed by the team that made the *Last Bible* series, these are quite similar to it, utilising an overhead view in exploration and a first-person view in combat. The human characters don't directly participate in combat, and encounters are generally limited to two-on-two. Nonetheless, it has many of the series' staples (named spells, conversations to recruit allies, various demon fusion mechanics), though somewhat simplified for the younger audience. And even though they're aimed at kids, they still contain themes from the grown-up series, like the dynamics of law vs. chaos (angels vs. demons). Indeed, the protagonists of the first game are actually half-demon, with Lucifer being their father. Even for experienced *Megami Tensei* fans, part of the appeal is seeing some of the demons and mythological figures done in a cutesy style. Ultimately, however, both the writing and mechanics are probably too simple for most older gamers to actually enjoy for any length of time, though the games themselves are relatively short.

In spite of a TV anime, comic book tie-ins, a trading card game, and several spinoffs (including *Puzzle de Call,* a variation on Atlus' *Puzzle Boy* series, and *Messiahlyzer*, an odd real-time strategy game), *Devil Children* never quite took off, and Atlus abandoned it after the GBA era.

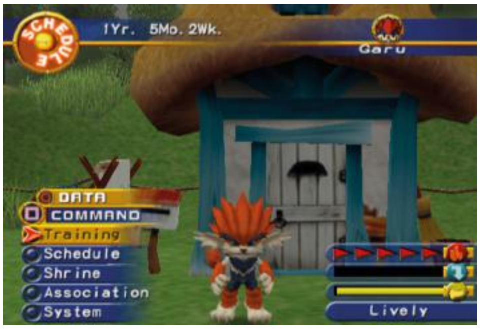
GAME BOY ADVANCE
DemiKids
ATLUS

***DemiKids* was the first title to be released in North America on which the *Shin Megami Tensei* label appeared.**

BULLISH
HISTORY
HISTORY

Monster Rancher (series)

Developer: Tecmo | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2, GBC, GBA, DS



PlayStation.2
Monster Rancher 4
TECMO

***Monster Rancher* is more of a simulation/breeding game than a regular monster-collecting JRPG, though it's obviously inspired by them. *Monster Rancher 4*, pictured on this page, is regarded as one of the better entries in the series.**

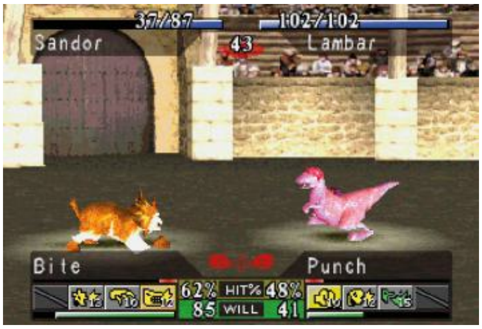
When it comes to the monster raising and collecting genre of RPGs, if *Pokémon* is the Major Leagues and *Digimon* is the minors, then *Monster Rancher* is probably a high school team – sure, there's still people showing up to every game, but it's not exactly selling out stadiums. Developed by Tecmo and known as *Monster Farm* in Japan, the series made its debut on the original PlayStation in 1997, and gained a quick cult following for its innovative use of the disc-based system.

There are five mainline entries in the series, all on PlayStation consoles – four numbered games, then *Monster Rancher EVO*, the fifth and final one. There were also two GBA titles, *Monster Rancher Advance* and *Advance 2*, plus the Nintendo DS entry *Monster Rancher DS*. These retain much of the gameplay seen in the PlayStation titles. A card-game spinoff was released on the Game Boy Color, *Monster Rancher Card Battle GB*, which was followed up by *Monster Rancher Battle Card Episode II* on the PlayStation. Other spinoff titles include *Monster Rancher Explorer*, *Monster Rancher: Hop-A-Bout*, and the Japan-exclusive *Kaite Shabette Hajimeyou!: Monster Farm DS*, *Monster Farm Online*, *Monster Farm POP* and *Monster Farm POP 2*. Despite not being one of the bigger monster-collecting franchises, it was certainly prolific for a while.

The basic premise is consistent across the entire series: after the world was subjected to a disaster, people prayed to God for help, and were rewarded with powerful new life forms that helped them. However, these new creatures also brought issues, so God responded by sealing them away in Disc Stones. Many years later, humans have uncovered some of these Stones in ancient ruins, and have used a temple to unlock the monsters sealed within. Now, humans and monsters peacefully coexist, and a new sport has arisen: monster breeders are able to battle their strongest allies against others in flashy competitions.

As a monster breeder, it's the player's job to raise monsters to fight in these battle tournaments. In addition to simply making monsters more powerful through training, the player is responsible for keeping them happy and healthy. Monsters can end up with positive or negative morale depending on how they're raised, which can influence how well they do in battle – for example, a particularly loyal creature is more likely to land a critical hit in battle. After a certain amount of time, a monster will either die or retire from battle; retired monsters can be used to create new, more powerful generations. Gameplay is well-balanced between the virtual pet aspect of monster-raising, and the battles and tournaments.

The gimmick with the PlayStation *Monster Rancher* games is that monsters can be unlocked by putting an actual CD (or DVD, for the PS2 games) into the system. The CD-reading system developed by Tecmo specifically for this series


37/87
102/102
Sandor
43
Lambar
Bite
Punch
62%
HIT%
48%
85
WILL
41

PlayStation
VIRTUAL MONSTER BREEDER
MONSTER RANCHER

The original *Monster Rancher* was keen to advertise the near-limitless number of monsters you could generate by trying out the game and music CDs in your own collection.

uses the discs to generate a set of numbers, which are then used as the resulting monster's statistics. A select few discs could produce specific monsters; the disc for another Tecmo game, *Dead or Alive*, provided an Easter Egg: a Pixie with the name Kasumi.

The first two *Monster Rancher* games for the PlayStation are really more simulation than RPG. Much of the game is spent navigating through menus, and everything is explained through partner characters. There are expeditions you can go on for new items or monsters, some of which play out like JRPG dungeons. When the series jumped to the PlayStation 2, it began introducing more traditional RPG elements, like putting the player into an actual character in the story, and letting them run around town and various areas. Much of this takes place in simple medieval fantasy-type worlds. *Monster Rancher EVO* is a little different from the others, in that it focuses on running a carnival; in between training your monster to put on shows, there are various other things you do to make the audience happy, like playing brief mini-games.

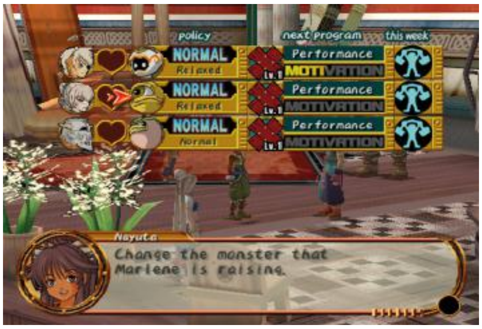
The battle systems are also different from those in traditional JRPGs. You have direct control over your monster, though you can only really move forwards or backwards, and use a variety of attacks or dodge moves. Most games have one-on-one battles, but *Monster Rancher EVO* again changes things up, by having three-on-three fights.

In the Game Boy Advance titles, input of key words or phrases is used to generate new monsters, as the disc-reading system couldn't be used for a cartridge-based portable. The DS entries can generate monsters in a couple of different ways that take advantage of the system's unique input options: players can speak into the microphone or draw something on the bottom screen.

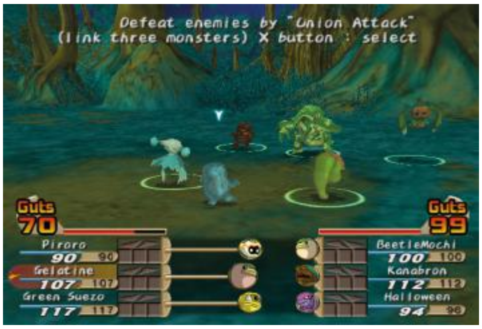
There are both common and rare types of monsters to raise across the different games. The mascot characters, in that they're featured regularly on the covers, are Suezo, which are basically tadpoles with gigantic heads, a huge single eye, and a large mouth, and Mocchi, a penguin-type bird. Each monster has six stats to work from: Power (physical attack), Intelligence (energy attack and defence), Life (hit points), Skill (accuracy), Speed (evasion), and Defense (blocking physical attacks). These stats are up-rated by doing chores or training under an expert; they can also be quickly raised by using vitamins, but this comes at the cost of decreasing another stat, as well as a shortened lifespan.

The spinoff titles feature very different gameplay from the main entries. *Monster Rancher Battle Card GB* and its sequel have the player travelling through the world in order to find new monster cards to add to their deck, with the gameplay focused on card battles. Meanwhile, *Monster Rancher Explorer* is basically a *Solomon's Key* game, but with *Monster Rancher* characters.

Though the series hasn't exactly sold gangbusters, it's been reviewed pretty solidly across all entries, with the monster summoning-raising-battling gameplay loop being noted as particularly addictive. *Monster Rancher* has maintained a solid cult following over the years (though more so in Japan than in other territories) and has carved out its own niche in an RPG sub-genre otherwise dominated by just one or two other series.


policy
next program
this week
NORMAL
Relaxed
Performance
MOTIVATION
Lv.1
NORMAL
Relaxed
Performance
MOTIVATION
Lv.1
NORMAL
Normal
Performance
MOTIVATION
Lv.1
Nayuta

Change the monster that Marlene is raising.



Defeat enemies by "Union Attack" (link three monsters) X button : select

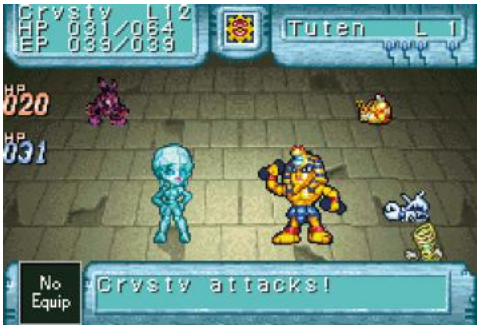
Guts 70
Guts 99
Piroro 90
Gelatine 107
Green Suezo 117
BeetleMochi 100
Kanabron 112
Halloween 94

PlayStation 2
MONSTER RANCHER EVO

Monster Rancher EVO made a number of changes to the series, putting you in charge of running a circus, alongside your monster breeding.

Robopon (series)

Developer: Hudson/Red Entertainment | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): GBC, GBA, N64



Crysty attacks!

GAME BOY COLOR
ROBOPON
SUN

***Robopon* is *Pokémon* with robots. Rather shameless, this one.**

At first glance, you would think *Robopon* is a *Pokémon* rip-off. And you'd be right – mostly. Hudson Soft's and Red Entertainment's *Robopon* series definitely took inspiration from the easily pocketed beasts (down to a premise based around beating gym-leader "legends" to become the very best), and the Atlus-published North American versions outright stole the box design from *Pokémon*'s first gen. However, the change to capturing and battling robots changed things in subtle ways, like having an upgrade system instead of Technical Machines, allowing you to combine software and parts to unlock new moves. The first gen even included an infra-red sensor on the cart, allowing you to use devices like TV remotes on the game itself, possibly changing in-game robot stats. There was even a business sim element that ran in real time, thanks to a built-in clock system.

However, the game remained largely unchanged, especially as the [US/English] release borrowed the same *Pokémon* fonts and health bars. The knock-off nature was impossible to ignore, even with these gimmicks and different systems. The "GB Kiss" infra-red sensor system also didn't get the same level of support in the West as it did in Japan, where it could be used to download exclusive content online. Of the *Sun*, *Moon*, and *Star* versions, only *Sun* was published in the West. A Japan-only N64 spinoff game with a real-time, arena-based combat system, *Robot Ponkottsu 64*, also failed to make waves with its grindy and simplistic gameplay. It even did away with levels, though it kept parts and software.

This makes *Robopon 2* all the stranger, as the GBA sequel managed to actually take the series in a more interesting and original direction. The writing became funnier and more bizarre, with casual use of time travel, and the art style shifted to make the game look more individual. Even the robot-capturing mechanic stolen from *Pokémon* was replaced with the ability to actually create the bots via battery fusion (a.k.a. Sparking). Battles even became large, four-on-four affairs, but the game failed to really impress. It was its own thing now, yes, but not a particularly exciting thing (though the West got both versions this time, *Ring* and *Cross*).

Robopon never took off, which isn't that surprising, given that its first two games were of such poor quality and so low on ideas (even parts and software were basically lifted from Quintet's *Robotrek* on the SNES). It's a strange footnote in the handheld JRPG scene, a great example of how not to establish a franchise. These games weren't without merit, but they were outpaced by the competition every step of the way. The terrible English translations did not help. Nowadays, if the series is remembered at all, it's for its bizarrely fetishistic manga, which featured female characters with abnormally proportioned breasts. They'd look absurd in a porno manga, but this was aimed at little kids!

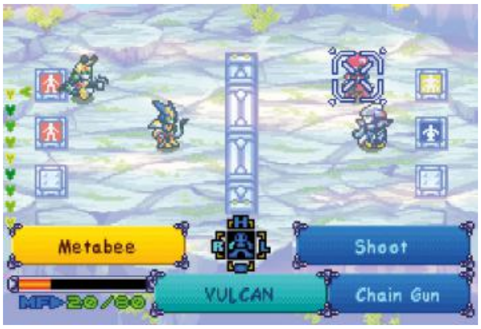
Medabots (series)

Developer: Natsume | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): GB, WS, GBC, PS1, GBA, GC, DS, 3DS

Medarot might be better known outside Japan for the anime series, which was released in English as *Medabots*, but the franchise began in 1997 as a manga and Game Boy RPG. The Medabots are customisable medal-powered robots that kids pit against each other in three-on-three battles. If *Pokémon* took inspiration from creator Satoshi Tajiri's bug-collecting hobby, then *Medabots* draws from Japanese insect fighting. The starter Medabots in each of the game's two versions are modelled on two popular battle bugs: the rhinoceros beetle and stag beetle.

The first *Medarot* game follows elementary school kid Hikaru as he finds a mysterious medal and encounters rival robot battlers like the villainous Rubberobo gang. Each Medabot can be equipped with various body parts that have different specs and attacks. Fights play out in real time, with the robots running laps of the battlefield to indicate when their turn is, like a goofy version of *Final Fantasy*'s ATB system. It seems simple, but the battles can be very lengthy and challenging. Random encounters are relentless, and Hikaru has to hand over his Medabot's parts when defeated. The original *Medarot* is rough, but it did establish many staples of the series. These include dating sim elements, as Hikaru can end up with one of two girls at the game's conclusion.

In *Medarot 2*, Hikaru is now a convenience store worker, and there's a new protagonist, Ikki. Though the sequel largely retreads the same ground, new features, like Medaforce abilities, add some strategy to battles. *Medarot 2* was adapted into an anime series, and later remade after the cartoon was a surprise success overseas. The *Metabee* and *Rokusho* versions released for the Game Boy Advance in 2002 remain the only *Medabots* RPGs available in English.



The series continued on the Game Boy Color, with Ikki fighting Medabots around the world and travelling into space. Each entry improved the visuals, making the Medabots look closer to the original illustrations by manga artist Rin Horuma. The Medabots also gained more personality, and voice acting was introduced. *Medarot 5* refreshed the cast again, using a rural setting, and has a battle system based around playing rock-paper-scissors to create combo attacks.

Following two Game Boy Advance remakes, the series had a hiatus, until it was revived by developer Delta Arts with *Medarot DS*. This 2010 title starred a new generation of characters, featuring 3D visuals and online battles. More titles were released for the 3DS, with welcome changes that gave players more control over their Medabots, while making fights faster and less punishing. Despite some upgrades, these games never sold as well as the Game Boy Color titles, and Delta Arts closed after *Medarot 9* came out in 2015.

Its popularity may have faded, but *Medarot* remains a strategic, if slow-paced, spin on the monster-battling JRPG, and there's still plenty of nostalgia for it in Japan.

GAME BOY ADVANCE
MEDABOTS
NATSUME

While largely unknown elsewhere, in Japan, *Medarot* still has many nostalgic fans due to its ambitious mechanics, silly storylines and great soundtracks by *Castlevania* composer Kinuyo Yamashita.

Jade Cocoon (series)

Developer: Genki | Released: 1998 | Platform(s): PS1, PS2

During the late ’90s and early 2000s, the gaming landscape was crawling with monster-collecting games. Everyone took a stab at it. *Jade Cocoon* by Genki, a company better known for its racing games, is one of those that didn’t last. At least Genki tried to go for a darker mood and different look to set it apart, contracting Katsuya Kondou, a Ghibli animator, to do the design work. The Ghibli look was clearly a selling point in Japan, but got lost on the hideous-to-plain-boring Western covers.

God cursed the world. Big, dangerous forests full of monsters spread across the land with humans living in small settlements on their edges. Levant is a Cocoon Master, who captures monsters to protect his village against the attacks of their wild brethren. However, interacting with the cursed forests makes him an outcast.

Jade Cocoon is a straightforward game. Four forests a couple of screens deep each contain monsters to capture and a boss to defeat at the end. Monsters align with four elements, which have a rock-paper-scissors relationship of effectiveness against one another. Only one monster can fight at a time, and only three can be brought on the journey. Here’s where fusion comes in, allowing for hybrids with more than one element each. Their look is also created by combining the two parents’ models. The often hilarious, horrifying, or hilariously horrifying results are often extremely memorable! Yet the atmospheric tale and breezy pacing are overshadowed by a lack of variety. A world entirely made of forests, having to delve into each of them twice, and the game ending after 10–12 hours together give the impression of lack of content.

Nevertheless, Genki made a second game on the early PS2, which had fewer RPGs available at that point, and fewer still in the monster-collecting style. However, it came out within spitting distance of *Final Fantasy X* so it failed to make an impact. This time we follow Kahu, an aspiring BeastHunter, who during his initiation trial is cursed by his new sidekick, the snarky elf Nico. With death fast approaching, Kahu has even more reason to find the four orbs of the forests to heal his curse.

Jade Cocoon 2 beefed things up a little. The tale is longer; the forests are deeper and offer more character interaction within. Kahu can take up to eight monsters into battle now, placed on a dial with slots corresponding to the elements, four pure ones and four mixtures of two. Turning the dial changes which three monsters are active in each turn. Monsters are now acquired as eggs, and fusion produces fixed types, not the odd mixes of the original.

While it’s certainly expanded, the game sports a bit of an identity crisis. The forests can still be moody, and the story has some dark turns. Yet the characters are quirky and Nico even breaks the fourth wall. It seems like Genki didn’t know whether they should stay with the grounded style of the original, or lighten it up to catch a younger monster-collecting audience.

Outside Japan, *Jade Cocoon* is the closest thing we have to a monster-collecting RPG (*Monster Rancher* notwithstanding).

Monster Hunter Stories

Developer: Capcom/Marvelous | Released: 2016 | Platform(s): 3DS, IOS, AND

Time to fight!

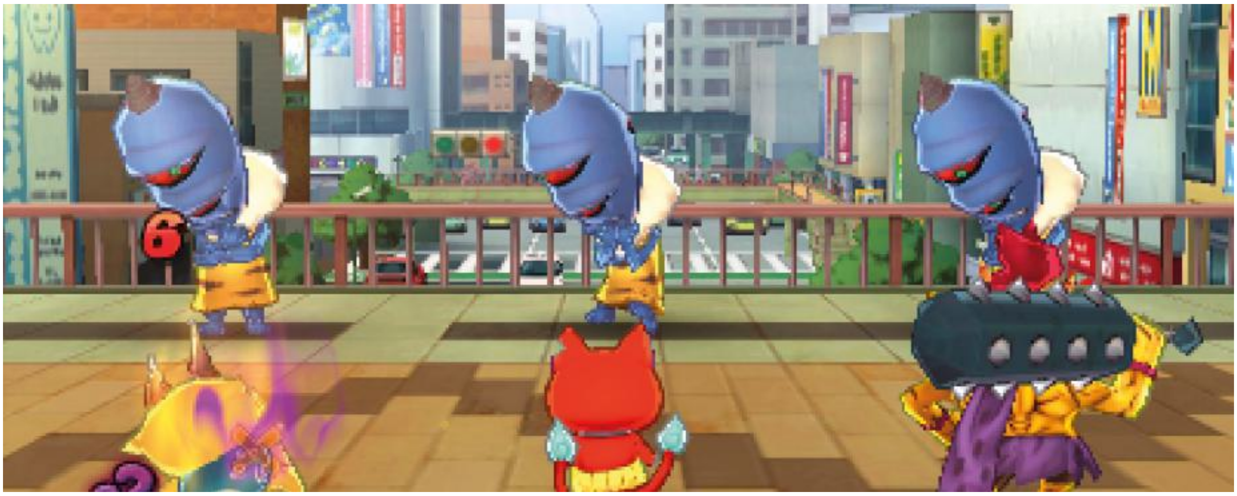
Capcom's *Monster Hunter* series began in 2004 for the PlayStation 2, and eventually exploded in popularity, at least in Japan, when it hit the PlayStation Portable. With a focus on multiplayer action, several players could get together, fight gigantic beasts, then use the winnings obtained from the fight to craft more powerful equipment; this style of gameplay spawned a whole sub-genre known as "hunting action" in Japan, resulting in a number of similar games, like Sony's *Soul Sacrifice* and Namco's *God Eater*. While there are role-playing elements, the general consensus is that these aren't really JRPGs, although this label definitely applies to *Monster Hunter Stories*, a 3DS spinoff aimed at kids.

In this game, you aren't technically a hunter, but rather a rider, who tames and creates bonds with their monster buddies (given the adorable name Monsties). You control a newbie rider, who must fight back against an encroaching menace known as the Black Blight. Although your customisable character is silent, you're accompanied by Navirou, a hyper-cutesy version of the cat-like Felyne creature, who acts as your guide; the other Monsties imported from the main series aren't quite as adorable, but they are more colourful and stylised, perfect for the bright anime aesthetic (which worked perfectly in the inevitable anime adaptation, *Monster Hunter Stories: Ride On*). The game also uses Zenny as currency, a recurring theme in Capcom games.

In combat, it's just you and your main Monstie, and for the most part, you only really command your character while your partner acts on its own. The game adapts the action of the mainline series into turn-based battles – there's a rock-paper-scissor system for the Power, Technical, and Speed attacks, whereby you look at monsters and attempt to read what kind of move they'll use. Pull this off successfully and your bond with your Monstie will strengthen, eventually allowing you to ride it in battle for extra damage, and then enabling super-powerful attacks. Monsties can also be ridden on the field and have various abilities that let you jump or fly over the terrain. Wild Monsties cannot be tamed, so instead you infiltrate monster dens to steal their eggs. They can also be customised to an extent, by basically splicing DNA to unlock extra skills. Your human character can also change weapons, choosing from swords, axes, a sword and shield combo, and a hunting horn, each with different main and combo abilities. It seems simple at first, but it gets more complex as you choose how best to work alongside your partner. You also have three Hearts, which act something like lives; fall in combat and you'll hop back up to full strength but at the expense of one heart. These are regenerated when you rest.

While the story is typical and the writing nothing special, this is a gorgeous game, much better than most 3DS RPGs. The battle system is interesting, and there are enough cool Monstie types to find and collect to make it engrossing.

While an excellent adaptation of *Monster Hunter*, both in putting it into a JRPG format and aiming it at kids, this series seemingly didn't go down well outside of its home country, with international versions missing content that was patched into the Japanese release.



Yo-kai Watch (series)

Developer: Level-5 | Released: 2013 | Platform(s): 3DS, NSW, PS4

YO-KAI WATCH
NINTENDO 3DS

***Yo-kai Watch* was a phenomenon in Japan, though like most fads (or pretty much anything aimed at kids), it died down within a few years.**

For a while, Level-5's *Yo-kai Watch* franchise was the closest anyone had come to making a dent in *Pokémon*'s enduring popularity. Like many others, it's spread across various media, including anime, video games and manga, as well as plenty of toys.

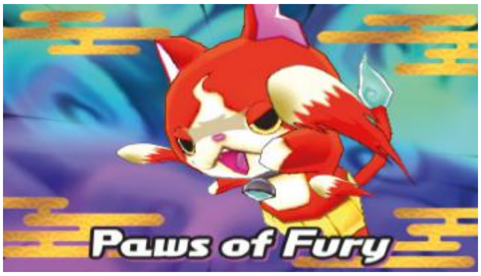
The initial entry in the video game series lets you control an average, everyday adolescent (either Nathan Adams or Katie Forester). He or she discovers the eponymous Yo-kai Watch, which allows them to see and interact with spirits. These youkai (or "Yo-kai" as the English version has it) are described as "mischievous creatures responsible for all of life's annoyances", some friendly, some of whom aren't. If you manage to make friends with one, it'll give you its medal, allowing you to summon it in the future.

The hero is guided by a ghost named Whisper, who calls himself a "Yo-kai butler", but actually doesn't know that much about his fellow spirits, and just reads stuff off a tablet. However, the most popular character is Jibanyan, a red cat that perished after getting hit by a car and has spent the rest of his afterlife training to beat up trucks. As with other monster-collecting games, there are evolutions (and even some fusions), with several different variations of Jibanyan across the different games, including Baddinyan (a delinquent), Shogunyan (a samurai), and Hovernyan (who flies, wears a cape, and talks like a tokusatsu hero).

The Yo-kai differentiate themselves from Pokémon not only by talking and having distinct personalities, but also, in many cases, by having individual powers. Dismarelda makes people sad, while her husband Happierre makes them happy. Cheeksqueek makes people fart, Fidgephant makes people need to use the toilet, and Tattletell makes people blurt out whatever is on their mind. There's quite a bit of slapstick and toilet humour, which makes sense given the target audience.

But beyond this, it's easy to see why the franchise took off. There's something fascinating about interacting with otherworldly beings that only you (outside of a few NPCs) can see and talk to. Plus, much of the game involves exploring your neighbourhood, searching through its various alleyways and sewers to find new Yo-kai, or even doing naughty things like sneaking out at night for adventures with your friends.

In the context of the television show, Nate summons various Yo-kai buddies to help defuse situations where others are causing trouble, but in the context of the games, they're called on to fight in RPG-style battles. The battle system for the first two games is a little unusual. You can't directly issue commands, and instead the Yo-kai fight of their own volitions, either attacking, defending, Inspiriting (casting status effects) or Loafing (wasting a turn). You assign six Yo-kai pals to a ring, with three in active combat, and three waiting on the sidelines. Since these were originally designed for the 3DS, stylus use is your main system interface, rotating the ring to bring new fighters into, and existing fighters out of, combat. You can choose to have them target specific enemies



The Fish Place

***Yo-kai Watch*'s mascot character is Jibanyan, a cat spirit that perishes in a car accident and spends his days training so he might have the power to take down a speeding truck.**

(or specific parts of large boss monsters), and can toss them items to heal them or increase their Soul meters.

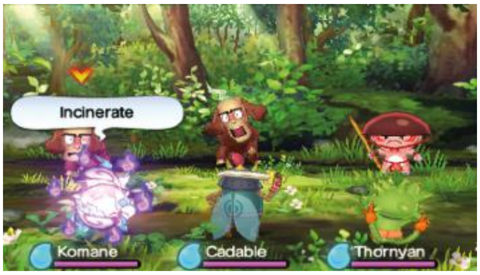
When their Soul meter is at max, you can command them to do a Soultimate super-move, executed after performing a random touch screen mini-game (pop some bubbles, spin a wheel, and so forth). If one of your characters is Inspirited, you can also rotate them out and Purify them in a similar manner. Despite the fact that you can't directly control your party members, you're still constantly juggling different tasks, so it's very rarely boring, plus you can fast-forward the speed. This was obviously designed for kids too young to really understand a turn-based battle system with lots of text, à la *Pokémon*. However, collecting new Yo-kai is pretty frustrating, since it's entirely random whether they'll join you after a fight. You can toss them food to increase the odds a bit, but it's still too much of a dice roll.

The first game is pretty basic, with its story broken up into chapters that send you on various sub-quests, exploring the protagonist's suburban home of Springdale. It's a little aimless until the end, when an existential threat pops up to be defeated. The second game is a little more involving, as the hero must travel to the past to meet up with their own grandfather, who could also communicate with Yo-kai. There are plenty of new areas to explore along with the different time periods, as well as tons of new Yo-kai and many other additional features. Like *Pokémon*, this release was initially split up into two versions: *Fleshy Souls* and *Bony Spirits*, with a third, complete version being released later, subtitled *Psychic Specters*.

Yo-kai Watch 2 adds a mini-game called Yo-kai Watch Blasters, where you run through the streets as various Yo-kai from your collection. This was expanded into a separate game. In Japan, this was called *Yo-kai Watch Busters*, but this was too close to *Ghostbusters*, of which it's a flagrant parody, so the name was changed for the international release.

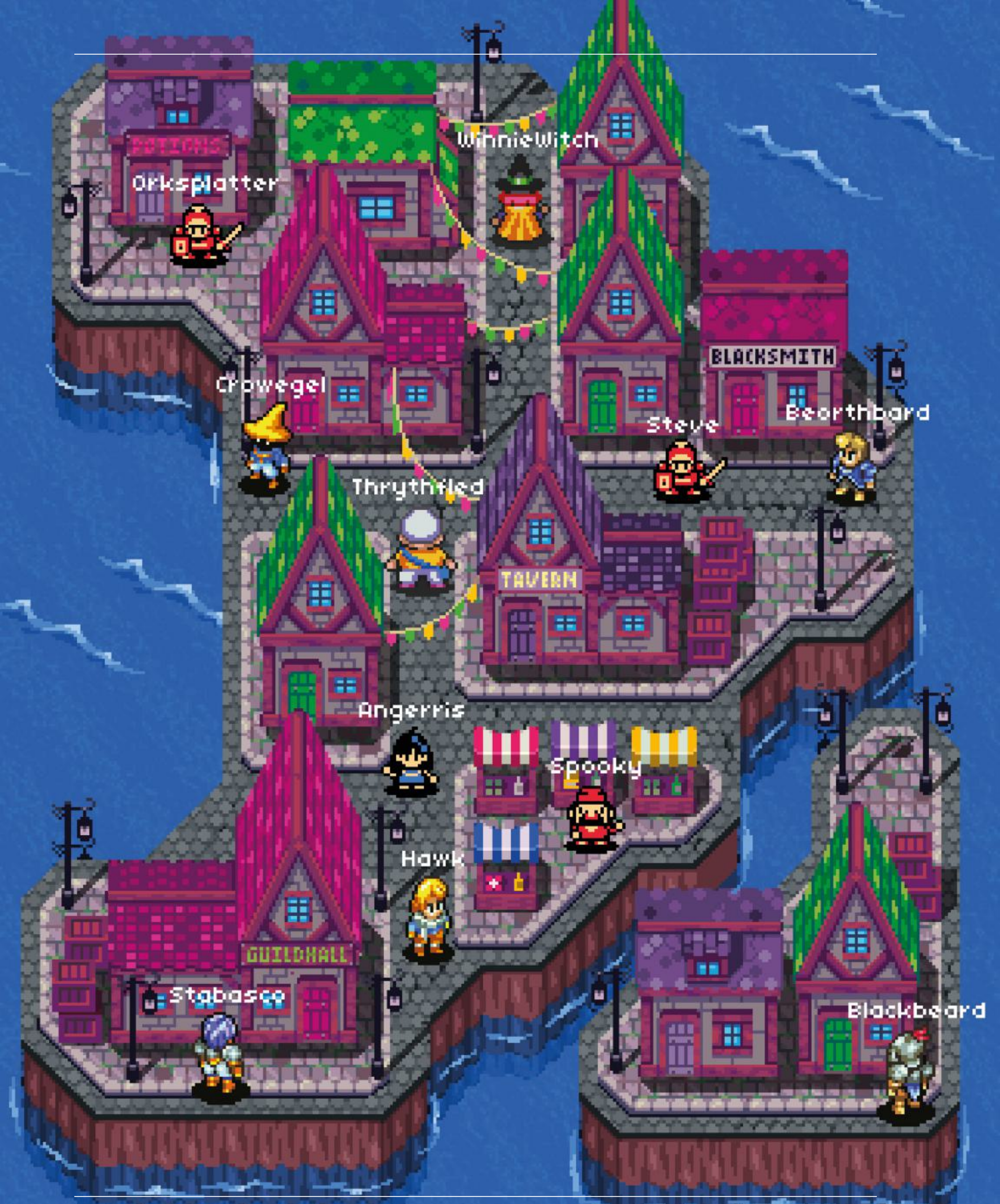
Yo-kai Watch 3 was even more ambitious, though it has to confront some localisation issues. The series obviously takes place in Japan, although the international versions change some names to imply that it takes place in the player's native territory. In this third game, Nathan moves across the ocean to the United States ... but since players have inferred that he already lived there in earlier entries, the localisers invented a new location: BBQ. This is important because some of the new Yo-kai in this game are based on American things, like baseball. There's also a fascination with aliens and UFOs, as the game opens with two characters who are clearly based on Mulder and Scully from *The X-Files*. Meanwhile, Katie is demoted to supporting character, while the heroine role is filled by a new girl named Hailey Anne, who stays back home in Springdale and can explore some new areas, including Sparkopolis, the in-world equivalent to Tokyo's Akihabara district. The battle system has also been revamped, so you can move your characters around a grid, both to aid in attack and defence, and to pick up power-ups.

In Japan, the series was extremely popular for a few years before burning out, though Level-5 continued with a fourth entry, and a port of the first game to the Nintendo Switch. Internationally, its reception was more varied – in America, the TV show and the game did relatively well, but the toys were a failure. Level-5 also took their time localising the games, resulting in long gaps between releases. As such, the series collapsed into a niche after a couple of years. That's unfortunate, because while it might not have the enduring appeal of the big-name series, it's a fun, cute, fascinating series, and makes a perfect introduction to RPGs for younger players.



YO-KAI WATCH

While Yo-kai fight automatically in battles, the player is in charge of rotating them in and out of combat, as well as doing touch screen challenges to enable special attacks and to keep them healthy.


POTIONS
WinnieWitch
Orksplatter
BLACKSMITH
Crowegel
Beorthbard
Steve
Thrythfled
TAVERN
Angerris
Spooky
Hawk
GUILDHALL
Stabasco
Blackbeard

Miscellaneous RPGs

We're finally near the end of this book, but it's not quite over yet! This final section has a handful of other RPGs that we couldn't quite fit in anywhere else.

First off, we're looking at a handful of MMORPGs. Like the computer RPG genre in general, this type of game began in North America, with entries like *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*, but Japanese developers created their own offshoots, and all of those featured here are extensions of existing properties. They also provide a good contrast to *World of Warcraft*, the other big Western-developed MMORPG, which is still being played today. Note that there have been many other MMOs based on Japanese properties, including fairly famous ones like *Shin Megami Tensei: Imagine*, as well as lesser known ones like *Grandia Online* and *Sorcerian Online*. However, due to the transient nature of these games, they were typically only in service for a handful of years, and are no longer functioning. They also tended to be exclusive to Asian territories.

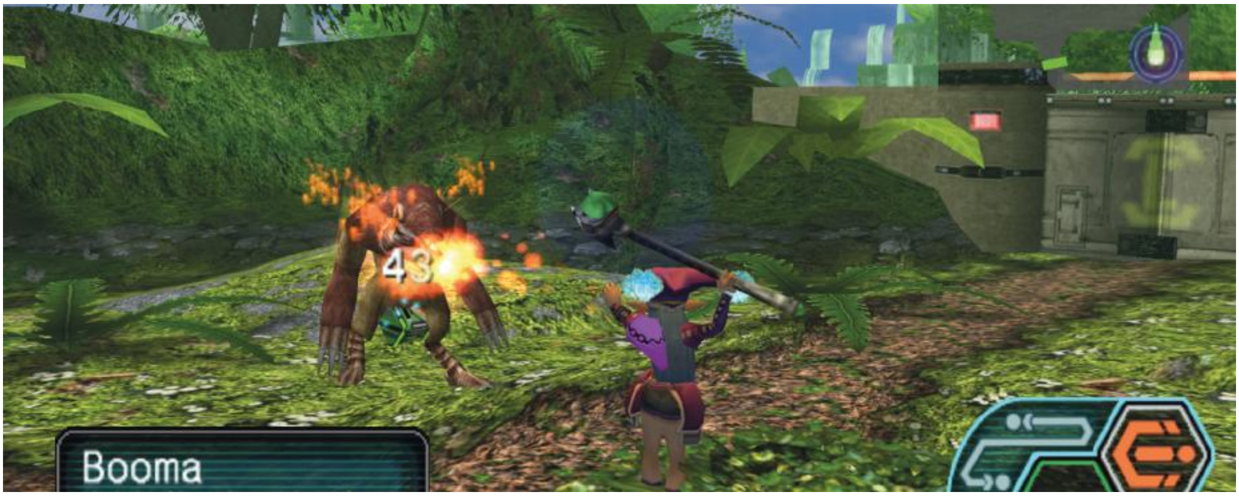
Next up there's a small selection of adult-themed RPGs. This type of game isn't as well-documented as others, primarily because they were largely restricted to home computers. From a more general perspective, they also aren't the best quality, as they typically just borrow established design trends in the most straightforward manner possible, and use that as an excuse to stick in naked women. However, it is worth examining some of the more prolific series, as well as some of the unlicensed games that ended up on 8- and 16-bit consoles.

Following that is a brief look at some sports and racing-themed RPGs, and a few other offbeat titles that don't fall into established categories. Some of these aren't really RPGs, but rather games in other genres that incorporate RPG-style modes, and it's interesting to see how these blend in with the underlying format.

After that we'll look at some Western-developed JRPGs. Right at the start, we established that "JRPG" is a genre descriptor, rather than only being applicable if an RPG comes from Japan. And of course, as these games started seeing more popularity in the West, there were Western developers that sought to emulate them. Not all of these were successful experiments, but they're interesting too.

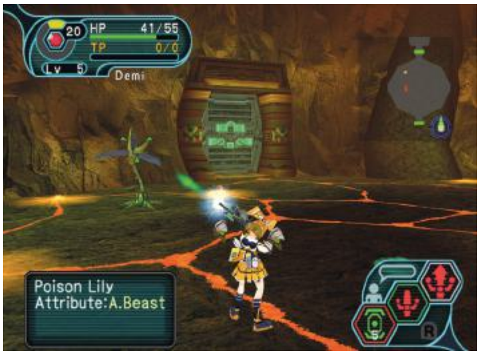
Finally, we're finishing off with two games that deconstruct JRPG tropes, *Undertale* and *Moon: Remix RPG Adventure*, both of which were made by folks that not only had deep love for JRPGs, but also knew how poke fun at them.

While modern MMORPGs originated in North America, the Japanese created a number of them as well, often based on other well-known JRPG properties.



Phantasy Star Online (series)

Developer: SEGA | Released: 2000 | Platform(s): DC, GC, XB, WIN, PSP, DS, PSV



Dreamcast
PHANTASY STAR ONLINE

Of the SEGA Dreamcast's many innovations, none proved quite as influential as its online capabilities. Yuji Naka and Sonic Team leveraged the popular JRPG series *Phantasy Star* to break new ground with the first ever online console RPG, *Phantasy Star Online* (*PSO*). The new title eschewed the turn-based combat of prior entries, opting for action combat with an emphasis on loot, to stand toe-to-toe with Western RPG juggernaut *Diablo*.

PSO's story unusually for the series, is not the main focus; instead players are encouraged to dive in and play with others online. Each takes the role of an adventurer aboard the refugee ship Pioneer 2, escaping from their doomed home planet. Upon arrival at their new home, Ragol, an explosion on the surface forces the crew of Pioneer 2 down to the surface to investigate. The players hack and slash through four unique environments, defeating monsters, collecting loot, and unravelling the mysteries of the planet, ultimately leading to a clash with a version of series antagonist Dark Falz.

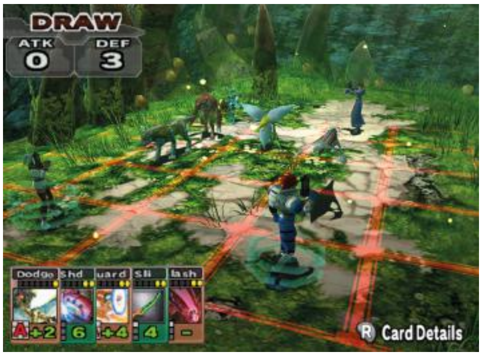
That story quickly takes a backseat to the brand new gameplay. Upon starting a new game, the player is prompted to create a character, a series first. While the classes are new, the races and archetypes they represent will be familiar to series veterans. Three class types (Hunter, Ranger, and Force) represent mêlée, ranged combat, and magical experts. Each type is further divided by race and gender, with three combinations available for each class type. Full customisation options allow players to personalise their characters to an impressive degree for the era, from basic hair and colour options to a cross slider allowing for a huge variety of body types.

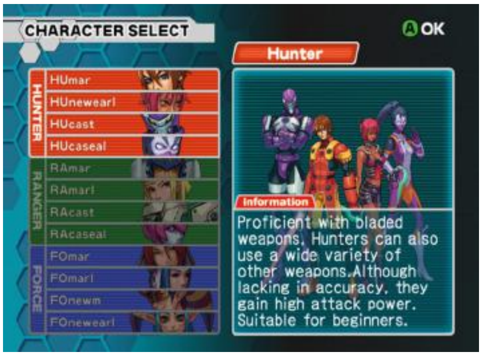
After creating a character, players can play offline or online. While the game can be completed offline by a single player, it only reaches its full potential with a group. When playing online, up to four players can share an instanced hub world in Pioneer 2, where they can interact via text, emoticons, or pre-generated phrases. Ragol is divided into four areas for exploration, unlocked in sequence, with each offering a brand new environment and new enemy types, along with tempting loot, giving new players a sense of discovery throughout their first playthrough.

Descending to the planet and battling through these areas comprises the majority of the game. Physical combat consists of light and heavy attacks, but rather than just mashing buttons, each attack requires rhythmic button presses to execute basic combos. As the rhythm changes for each weapon type, learning to use your weapon becomes key. Spell-like techniques, items, and traps add more variety.

All available actions can be used via the action palette, six configurable buttons that can be mapped to any action in the game. This innovation grants ample customisation for most classes, though the sheer number of techniques available to Forces often renders the palette inadequate.

The Dreamcast had a built-in modem, a first in a mainstream console, and *Phantasy Star Online* was one of its killer apps.





Proficient with bladed weapons. Hunters can also use a wide variety of other weapons.Although lacking in accuracy, they gain high attack power. Suitable for beginners.

Outside of the action palette are the game's ultimate attacks, Photon Blasts, granted by another series staple: MAGs. While a MAG starts as a small, innocuous device floating behind your character and offering a minor stat boost, these virtual pets can be fed consumable items that boost their core stats. Depending on which stat the player chooses to focus on, the MAG can evolve along different paths through a branching tree of MAG evolution. Researching the evolution tree and feeding your MAG appropriately becomes a significant part of build planning when creating new characters. This made *PSO* online in more ways than one, with research outside the game becoming essential to making it through the hardest content.

Characters can level up with experience earned by defeating enemies, but the real core of progression echoes the game's primary inspiration, *Diablo*: acquiring loot. New weapons and armour are dropped by enemies, with bosses dropping some of the rarest and most coveted weapons in the game. Higher difficulties yield scarcer rewards, incentivising gamers to replay the game to collect higher tiers of equipment. This loop, once released, provided a long-term hook for players.

This recipe proved incredibly popular with players, offering many their first taste of online gaming. After the discontinuation of the Dreamcast in 2001, *PSO* continued in *Phantasy Star Online: Ver. 2* for Windows, adding new content alongside a paid subscription. The console version got a new lease of life on the Nintendo GameCube, and later Microsoft Xbox, as *Phantasy Star Online: Episode 1 & 2*. In addition to a new chapter that acts as a full sequel to the original game, the GameCube version added improved graphics, new classes, and an offline split screen, allowing players without an internet connection to play through the game with friends. The new content was popular with existing fans, with offline multiplayer offering a new way to play for those who missed out on the online action.

Another sequel followed just a year later, with a significant change: *Phantasy Star Online Episode III: CARD Revolution* replaced the dungeon-delving RPG elements of the original game with a turn-based tactical RPG based around card battles. Players built custom decks made up of classic *PSO* monsters, items, and techniques, and did battle in both story mode and online competition. While this was an unexpected move, it was well received and offered a unique spin on the world fans had grown to love.

A full Windows port of *Episode 1 & 2* came in 2004, as *Phantasy Star Online: Blue Burst*, which also included a new Episode 4, moving the game online-only to mitigate rampant item duplication problems. The last official servers for *Phantasy Star Online* lasted until 2010, and dedicated fans maintain private servers to this day.

In 2007, SEGA aimed to revamp the *PSO* series with a follow-up on PC, PS2, and Xbox 360: *Phantasy Star Universe*. Unlike *PSO*, the game featured a fully-realised single-player story, attempting to cater to both new and returning fans. While it sold well enough to produce an expansion and several PlayStation Portable spinoffs, the core gameplay felt dated, with the rote story doing little to elevate the rest of the game. Another revamp came in 2008, called *Phantasy Star 0*, for the Nintendo DS, with a more cartoony look and a stronger focus on story. The game did an admirable job of adapting the scope of *PSO* to the smaller system, but the scale-down came at the cost of a crowded UI and smaller combat areas.

Phantasy Star Online 2, a fully-fledged sequel to *Phantasy Star Online*, was released in Japan in 2012, offered an experience more akin to a full MMORPG while maintaining the action core of the series. The game would flourish across a number of systems in Japan before localisation into English in 2020 for the Xbox One and Windows. *PSO2* would inspire spinoff *Phantasy Star Nova* for the PlayStation Vita in 2014, putting a *Monster Hunter* spin on *Phantasy Star Online 2*'s world. While *Nova* was successful in Japan, it never saw a Western release.

Phantasy Star Online remains a landmark title in both online gaming and RPGs. Not only did it offer an early example of a classic JRPG franchise completely overhauling its core gameplay into something entirely new, a move that would later be seen in hit titles like *Final Fantasy XI* and *Dragon Quest X*, it acted as a gateway to the online gaming world for countless gamers. *PSO* remains the original blueprint for the modern co-op JRPG. While the main series lies dormant, *Phantasy Star Online* continues on.

Alas, the Dreamcast died a fairly quick death, but SEGA supported the series across many consoles.

Final Fantasy XI

Developer: Square | Released: 2002 | Platform(s): PS2, X360, WIN

The turn of the century is an arbitrary point in time, but oddly one that feels, in retrospect, like a great change in the world. It was certainly palpable in the video gaming world, all thanks to the mid-'90s PlayStation- and N64-led push towards 3D graphics and gameplay. On top of this, we see an incredibly large expansion in storage medium space. The rise of CDs ended the era of multiple floppies; a few years on, game worlds had ballooned onto multiple CDs. Then DVDs came along, and almost as soon as those became mainstream, games started using multiple DVDs. In short, graphics were getting better and games were getting larger. All the while, a third dimension was expanding: the internet.

Square found themselves riding this wave. They were pushing graphics technology farther and farther. They were even on the cusp of releasing an entirely computer-generated movie, that they had sunk a company-ruining amount of money into. It was this drive for innovation that made Square take one of their weirder bends, into online gaming, with *Final Fantasy XI Online*.

MMORPGs had become popular in the '90s, primarily through American PC games like *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*. SEGA was at the forefront of online connectivity with *Phantasy Star Online*, though that had more common with the dungeon crawler *Diablo*. Consequently, when Square released *Final Fantasy XI*, it was also competing directly against those more ambitious titles. The game was first released on the PlayStation 2, easily the most popular console in Japan at the time, although ill-equipped for such a game out of the gate; players had to buy a network adapter and a hard drive. *FFXI* was not platform-exclusive though, and appeared on both the Xbox 360 and PCs.

Final Fantasy XI is an almost impossibly huge game to understand. So, to even begin grasping at it, it might be best to understand how *Final Fantasy XI* relates to *Final Fantasy*. At this time of turmoil for Square, *Final Fantasy* started getting really introspective, something it still proudly continues to this day. For example, *Final Fantasy IX* was created as a great big love letter to the 8- and 16-bit games. *XI*, on the other hand, goes for a far more subtle approach. Every *Final Fantasy* has Chocobos, Moogles, and a handful of similar monsters. *Final Fantasy XI*'s biggest connection to its predecessors, however is its Job system. All of the Jobs it uses are taken from previous games, except the Puppet Master.

The game takes place in the world of Vana'diel. Aesthetically, it is quite different from any *Final Fantasy* that came before (or after) it. The PlayStation era of the series embraced the fancy, modern look, similar to anime and manga, but that most definitely does not apply to *Final Fantasy XI*. The elves, Elvaan, are certainly not long-haired beautiful people, but instead they are weird, strong-faced, giraffe-necked folk. The cat people, Mithra, now resemble humans with cat-like features. This means that characters are far less outlandish-looking than in other series

PlayOnline
SQUARE ENIX
FINAL FANTASY XI
VANA'DIEL COLLECTION 2007
Rise of the Zilart
Chains of Promathia
Treasures of Aht Urhgan
T
PC

***Final Fantasy XI* has seen various expansions since its initial release, including *Chains of Promathia*, and *Treasures of Aht Urhgan*.**

Crank
Nyehila

PlayStation 2
FINAL FANTASY XI

Final Fantasy XI has continued on for nearly two decades, though it obviously looks a bit dated nowadays.

entries. Also, visually speaking, the colours seem far more subdued. It certainly feels more like a Western game than a Japanese one.

Of course, what ties the game back to *Final Fantasy* is the gameplay. Any series fan might think that's quite the claim, as *Final Fantasy* gameplay is a tricky thing to nail down. However, *Final Fantasy XI* is trying to emulate the classic titles, specifically the first and third games for the NES/Famicom. For example, your initial Job is chosen from one of Warrior, Thief, Monk, White Mage, Black Mage, and Red Mage. Which, if you're one of those aforementioned fans, you'll recall as the starting Jobs in the very first *Final Fantasy*. This is to invoke the feeling of that game, in taking a party to go explore and dig around a dungeon, then find some treasure, or kill some big monster, at the end. What makes it an online game is that rather than controlling a party of heroes, you control one member of that party, and you have to gather and shape your own Heroes of Light. This, plus the trademark Job changes, laid the foundation for something distinctly *Final Fantasy*, but also quite unique.

As an MMO, *FFXI* retains its menu-based combat. Your spells and your attacks all are performed via this menu. If you're not familiar with MMOs, then you might not be familiar with the term "cool-down". This is the lapse of time before you can reuse an ability. Every action draws from one of several meters, and a far smaller cool-down timer. Juggling the meters and timer can add to an already skill-intensive game. This is on top of the idea that monsters are tough. RPGs usually have a discrepancy between monster and player character damage, so the challenge is marathoning strings of fights, and lasting. However in *FFXI*, each monster is as capable of killing you as you are of killing it. This gets amplified if you are playing a Mage, as regular attacks from a monster will do more damage to you than you will to him. This means you need to group up just to have a chance.

Now, the trick here is that the penalty for dying is steep. Combat can be skill-intensive, which means if you die in a group, a whole mess of people are going to die, and they are going to lose EXP. This makes the game pretty unforgiving, though par for the course in an MMO. Ultimately, it was the reason games like *World of Warcraft*, which softened these mechanics, became far more popular.

What it also did was remain up and playable for nearly 20 years, because while other games began to soften up in the shadow of *World of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy XI* stuck to its guns. The game is still cryptic, requiring a lot of careful reading of quests. Even figuring out how to unlock advanced Jobs involves exploration and obscure methods. EXP loss, while reduced, is still there. And you still need party members, though you can get AI ones. Surrounded by games that followed in *World of Warcraft*'s footsteps, this game continued to cater to those who preferred difficult, cryptic MMOs; this, given that MMOs are very costly to make, ensured that it retained some market share. Even though it has a sequel, *Final Fantasy XIV*.

What's more, though it was a big deal in the West, it was a huge deal in Japan. The game's single-player follow-up, *Final Fantasy XII*, moved to a more MMO-style battle system, a strange hybrid of this game and its successor, *Final Fantasy XIV*. Also, the *.hack* series of video games was clearly inspired by *Final Fantasy XI*, notably referencing the *FFXI* PlayOnline client within the game.

Dragon Quest X

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2012 | Platform(s): WII, WIIU, WIN, 3DS, PS4, NSW

The announcement of *Dragon Quest X* in 2011 as an online RPG for the Nintendo Wii made waves. Local papers referred to “Dragon Quest Shock” as both Sony’s and Square Enix’s stock prices plummeted because of decisions that on their surface seemed confounding.

But series creator Yuji Horii and the *DQ* production staff were playing by the same rules they always had. At that time the Wii was the best-selling home console in Japan and, in time-honoured tradition, the next main *Dragon Quest* ended up on the system that gave the most people an opportunity to play it. That *Dragon Quest X* was to be an MMO was surprising, but not entirely unexpected. Rumours about the next game featuring online elements had been circulating for a long time on 2channel and other Japanese message boards.

Horii had expressed interest in creating a game in which human players would stand in for NPCs in interviews going back to 1987. Factor in the success of *Dragon Quest IX*’s social elements, and this new direction begins to look less like a curve ball and more like an inevitability.

It’s the *Dragon Quest* way – little changes implemented over time that keep the series feeling like it always has. Even if the scope and mechanics of each game are greater than it’s predecessor’s, that’s not how they feel. Player comfort is a major factor in the continuing success of the series. If you have played one *Dragon Quest* you can play any *Dragon Quest*.

How then do you make an inherently complex genre like the MMORPG accessible to anyone? This was not unlike the challenge faced in developing the first *Dragon Quest* for the Famicom. For *DQ1*, Horii took inspiration from complicated CRPGs like *Wizardry* and *Ultima*, and worked to make something that reproduced the fun of these games in a console-friendly and approachable package. This tried and true method was the template for *Dragon Quest X*’s development as well.

When you start *Dragon Quest X* you are presented with the same Create a Goku character customisation system as in *Dragon Quest IX*. Players begin by creating a pair of siblings. The proportions of characters and the breadth of the world in *DQX* are closer to the home console experience of *Dragon Quest VIII* than the shrunk-down world of *DQIX*.

There is then a short prologue that covers the basics of exploration and combat. This section of the game is a solo affair, letting players take things at their own pace. By the end of the prologue a scythe-wielding demon named Nelgel has burned your hometown to ashes, left you for dead, and spirited your sister away to another world. The player’s soul is not willing to give up without a fight, so you are given the option of reincarnation as a member of one of six tribes of monsters.

The player thus has the choice of coming back as an Ogre, an Elf, a Fairy, a Dwarf, a Wedi, or a Pukulipo. Some of those creatures are self-explanatory, being staples of fantasy worlds. Wedis and Pukulipoes not so much … For reference, Wedis are merpeople and Pukulipos are little cat-like creatures. Akira Toriyama brings his own

The *Dragon Quest* series has seen highs and lows outside of Japan, but Square-Enix must have felt that this online entry probably wouldn’t compete in the West against *Final Fantasy XI*.

***Dragon Quest X* is playable on many platforms, including on your web browser or phone, via an HTML5 version.**

design sensibility to the look of each race: they all have appealing elements. Whether you like your monsters cute or fearsome, there's something here for you! The choice of character is mainly aesthetic, though stats do vary a little between races. The character design uses silhouetting well to convey this. For example, Ogres are big and burly and are therefore suited to warrior-type classes. Dwarves work better as martial artists, Wedis make good thieves, and so on. Really, though, any combination of class and race will do. This is *Dragon Quest* after all; friendly and approachable is the order of the day.

To that end, not much has changed in terms of player control and interaction. However, *Dragon Quest X* was designed to be played with a controller, and not a mouse and keyboard, although players can use a keyboard for typing. When the game came to Windows PCs it did not feature a hotbar, unlike other MMOs. Moreover, there are various systems in place to encourage players not to dedicate their lives to the game. Time spent logged out of *DQX* contributes to EXP and gold bonuses that mean that the player can always make some meaningful progress when they next log in. There is also "Kid's Time", a couple of free hours each day that do not require a paid subscription. As such, the usual MMO barriers are removed. A new player, young or old, can play comfortably.

The main goal is to regain your human form, save your sister and defeat Nelgel. To do this you have to collect several Key Emblems from around the world. Each Tribe has two major cities associated with it; in these cities you'll find the usual *DQ* story vignettes, with a Key Emblem as a reward. Stories in *Dragon Quest X* 1.0 involve a possessed king, a disgraced circus performer, a lizard that turns people into dolls, and many other fun scenarios full of that special mix of charm, wit and tragedy that characterises the series.

The game world of Astoltia is large and full of variety, monsters are appropriate to their surroundings, and they all have new idle animations that give them even more personality. A standout is the Slime Knight, which pets and plays with its slimy steed when out of battle. When you run into an enemy, you get the familiar battle swirl effect and a first-person view of the monster before the fight begins. Battles are menu-driven, a mix of active and turn-based combat that allows the player to move around between selecting commands. A new element comes with the player's Weight stat: heavier characters can push enemies around the battlefield. This is primarily used for moving Area of Effect spells away from healers and other magic users in the player's party.

Players can see other human-controlled characters in combat and even offer an encouraging cheer that raises tension in battle. It's not uncommon to see a sea of "Thank You" speech bubbles on the overworld after players cheer each other on during encounters.

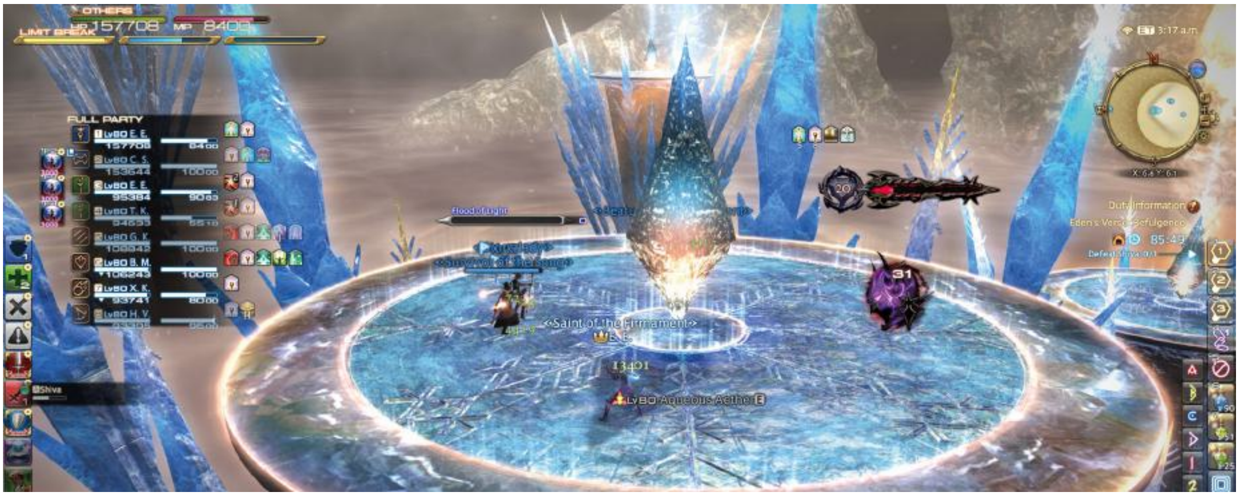
Another major priority for the development team was making sure that people could play through the game on their own if they wanted to. Solo adventurers can hire other people's characters from bars in towns and cities. The AI is as good as it's ever been and can bring you through every encounter in the game. The offline player's character even gets to keep the EXP and gold earned while they were hired out. It's a win/win situation for all involved.

In August 2020, *Dragon Quest X* entered its eighth year of service. Word is that the developers planned for at least ten years of updates. So far, the game has had five expansion packs and has seen ports to several platforms, including Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Nintendo Wii U, 3DS, and Switch. There is even an HTML5 version of the game that's playable on your phone or computer's web browser!

Players who had stuck it out with the Wii version of the game were given upgrades to the Switch port following the closure of the Wii servers. And though the Wii version of the game was lost, the game gained some graphics fidelity in the changeover; until a couple of years ago characters lacked individually modelled fingers.

Although there has been much interest and petition-writing it seems unlikely that *Dragon Quest X* will ever be released outside of Japan. The localisation effort alone would be a gargantuan undertaking. For a long time, the game implemented a region lock for Western players. The lock was recently lifted for American and Chinese IP addresses but is still active in Europe, where other workarounds are needed to connect to *Dragon Quest X*'s servers.

At first, the very idea of *Dragon Quest X* seemed antithetical to the RPG traditionalism normally associated with the series, but in practice the game is as true an entry as any other in the series. *Dragon Quest* has always been a social experience of sorts, lining up on launch day, swapping hints and strategies with classmates and co-workers. As Japan's "National Game", it always brought its intrepid adventurers together in the real world. With *Dragon Quest X*, Square Enix and Yuji Horii brought generations of fans together online as well.



Final Fantasy XIV

Developer: Square Enix | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): PS4, WIN

“I close my eyes, tell us why we must suffer. Release your hands, for your will drags us under.” These opening lines to the game’s main theme were also the words of many in September 2010, upon the release of one of the most mistake-ridden games ever. Amid tremendous outcry about its terrible quality and questions about what were they thinking, the decision was made to rebuild the game from the ground up. Condensing five years’ worth of developmental effort into half that period, while concurrently making content for the current product, the servers were shut off in November 2012, marking the End of an Era, known in-game as the Calamity. At the end of the tunnel, in August 2013, was the unveiling of this real-world Cinderella in her ball-gown, *Final Fantasy XIV*, or *FFXIV*.

FFXIV is a subscription-based MMORPG taking place in the world of Hydaelyn, primarily within the continent of Eorzea. In the real-time combat, enemies are targetted by the player, who then performs Actions to damage foes, heal allies, and control the situation. Of note is *FFXIV*’s effective use of positional tells to inform the player of upcoming damaging areas and mechanics. Mobility is of great importance, and the game knows it, to such a degree that the ability to move is tied into the narrative, acting as one of the many bridges between gameplay and story. At the time of writing, there are 17 combat classes, eight crafting classes, three gathering classes, and one extra-content class, providing a very wide array of interests to choose from and enjoy. Unlike many games of its kind, *FFXIV* does not restrict each character to a single class, instead allowing the player to switch to any other they’ve unlocked at any time, except during combat, an instance, or a cutscene. The game was designed from the ground up with player accessibility in mind, providing a large degree of information for newcomers to the MMO medium as well as having full controller support that works very well for both console and PC players.

An interesting thing to observe is that the developers don’t seem happy to let old content remain irrelevant. The use of the Roulette system incentivises players new and old alike to replay dungeons, boss fights known as Trials, and raids, to level up quickly and obtain useful resources, ensuring that all of the game’s various instances are always ready to be populated should a new player need to run a dungeon they just unlocked. The developers make a point of revamping content seen by the community as outdated or not worth doing, taking into account the feedback received. There are regular updates to add, adjust, and streamline various user functions and content, showing that the community’s concerns are heard.

The visuals of the game were staggeringly pretty on release; these days the game still looks good, due to its stylisation and careful artistic direction, with effective use of colour, ambient lighting, and atmospheric effects. There are eight playable races and thousands of pieces of equipment and cosmetic items to ensure your characters can stand out.

The initial release of *Final Fantasy XIV* was a disaster, but with a substantial amount of effort, Square Enix was able to remake it into an outstanding product that’s worth it even for those who don’t normally play MMORPGs.

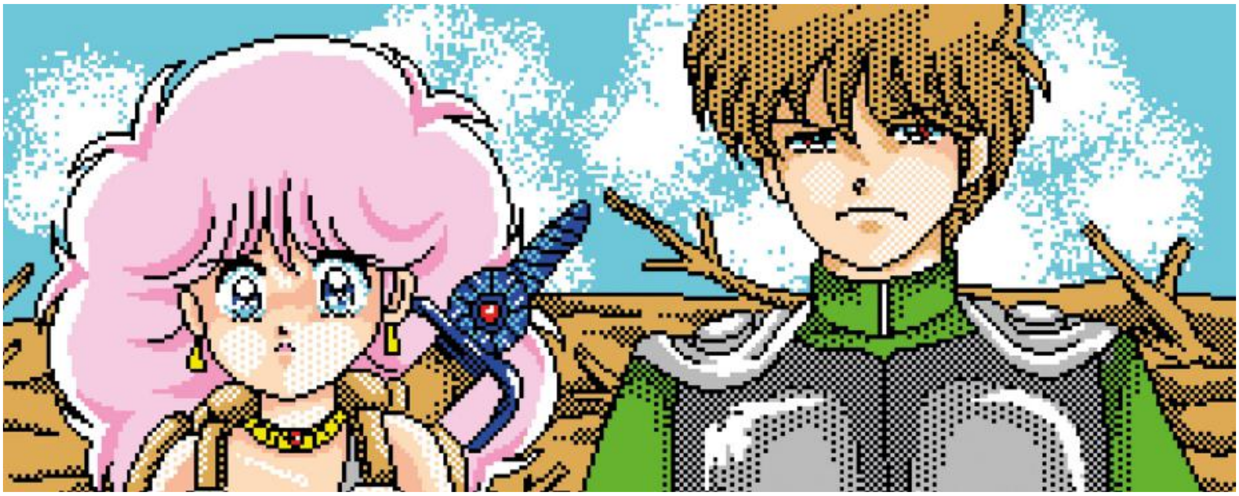
SHADOWBRINGERS
FINAL FANTASY XIV

Pictured left are some of the different outfits your can dress your characters in. The visual style is quite different from that of both *Final Fantasy XI* and other *Final Fantasy* games.

The score of *FFXIV* is immense, totalling over 100 distinct tracks at its relaunch, and adding many more since, via expansions. The musical library of the game is a plethora of original compositions and arrangements from previous entries, ranging across a wide selection of styles, with an emphasis on the orchestral. The majority of this effort was made by Masayoshi Soken, though the *Final Fantasy* veteran Nobuo Uematsu had a significant role in the original release of the game, including the composition of its main theme, "Answers".

One of *Final Fantasy XIV*'s greatest attributes is the quality of its writing. Along the way the player will encounter many, many NPCs of varying backgrounds and cultures. From major characters to ancillary extras, there's always something to take away from a situation, whatever the broader context of the moment. Even some of the most minor, seemingly insignificant characters can come back later on and become narrative focal points, remembering who you are and what you've done. One of the earliest conflicts the player will engage in is with the Primals, ideals of gods put forth by fervent belief, which are summoned by the Beast Tribes across the Eorzean continent. Superficially, this could be written off as "here's a bad thing for you to fight"; however, the game dissects the matter, pointing out that the various tribes resort to this as a desperate form of defence against the geographical and cultural expansions of the various city-states. It goes so far as to offer content allowing the player to work with the tribes, helping them secure their place among the nations, thereby mitigating their fears of colonial oppression by the superpowers. This is just one of the various ways that the writing ties back to itself and creates a sense that the world is coherent and vital, and that your actions actively change the socio-political landscape.

The launch of *Final Fantasy XIV* is nearly legendary at this point, generating almost universally negative critical and user responses; these reached such heights that the president of Square Enix issued a formal apology and suspended subscription fees. Similarly legendary is the effort put into revitalising the game, turning it from one of the worst large-scale failures in the industry to one of the most inspiring stories of success – indeed, it went on to effectively save the company. Producer Naoki Yoshida was the linch-pin of the entire revival, planning out and executing an unprecedented undertaking, in terms of both tightness of time-frame and immensity of scale, which had also to restore the user-base's respect. The commercial results are evident: the game has had three major expansions – *Heavensward*, *Stormblood*, and *Shadowbringers* – and boasts a player base exceeding 18 million active subscribers. More significantly, all this demonstrates the importance of transparency, and of communication with the user base. Yoshida has also made a case for reducing time pressure during development, as not only unnecessary, but actively detrimental to a game.

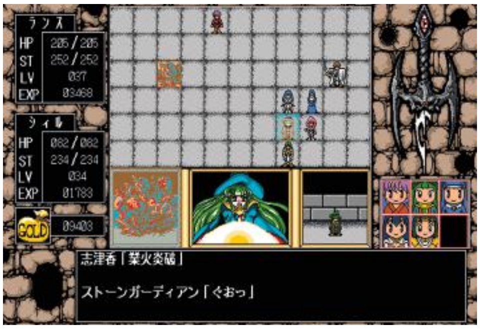


Rance (series)

Developer: AliceSoft | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, FMT, X68, WIN

In Japan's long and illustrious history of adult video games, none has stood the test of time as well as AliceSoft's decades-long adventure *Rance,* the story of the titular character and his quest for booty, and we're not talking about long lost treasures here. Rance's fundamental character stands in stark contrast to those found in contemporary JRPGs. As graphics and sound improved during the '80s, most RPGs continued to rely on the heroics of typical warriors, whereas Rance completely embraces his debauchery, and is wholly motivated by his sense of lust and lack of moral backbone.

The first in the series, *Rance: Hikari o Motomete,* introduces the anti-hero Rance and his slave-girl companion Sill, who are hired to find the daughter of a rich family. It follows the interactive adventure game model built up by Alicesoft's earlier games, like *Little Vampire,* disguising role-playing gameplay within what is ostensibly an adventure game model; actions are performed entirely by means of selection from menus. This was also true of the next game in the series, *Rance II: Hangyaku no Shoujotachi,* which elevates the game's graphical fidelity. In the third entry, *Rance III: Leazas Kanraku,* a new, top-down dungeon mechanic was implemented, bringing the gameplay closer to that of games like *Ultima.* It was the fourth game in the series in which the world and lore of *Rance* truly came into their own, showcasing some of the finest sprite and tilework seen on PC-98 hardware, and requiring two additional entries to tell more of the story presented in the game, *Rance 4.1: O Kusuri Koujou o Sukue* and *Rance 4.2: Angel-gumi*; these also allowed for "what if" scenarios and other non-canonical events. From here on, however, *Rance* would take a major departure and introduce an all-new type of play.



志津香「業火炎破」

ストーンガーディアン「ぐおっ」

With *Kichikuou Rance,* the gameplay switches to SRPG-style, à la *Fire Emblem,* allowing for an even wider roster of characters. Rance, now a king, has to contend with the emerging forces of various lands in the kingdom, as well as Sill growing disillusioned with him. This game features an incredibly rich cast, a surprisingly deep strategy system and a new, more balanced story, inheriting plenty of lewd humour from its predecessors, but also introducing many darker, more harrowing plot elements.

Rance then began to follow two timelines: *Kichikuou Rance* and the new mainline story introduced in 2002; and *Rance 5D: Hitoribocchi no Onna no Ko,* which takes him back to seeking dungeons and fair maidens. The series has kept going strong since, with around ten additional entries to the series, including continuations, spinoffs, and yet another take on the strategy genre – *Sengoku Rance,* themed around the warring-states era of Japan. Despite enjoying most of its success in Japan, the series has gained a growing fanbase overseas, following both fan translations and publisher MangaGamer's localisation of the series.

The *Rance* games have been regarded as being some of the best adult RPGs out there, though your enjoyment will most likely hinge on how much toleration you have for the eponymous protagonist.

Toushin Toshi (series)

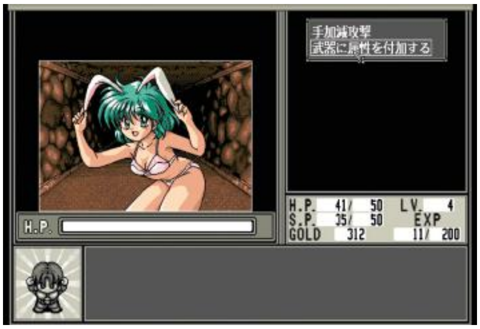
Developer: AliceSoft | Released: 1990 | Platform(s): PC98, X68, WIN, 3DS

Toushin Toshi ("War God City"), takes place in the world of The Continent, where a tournament of the Gods is held annually in Toushin City. In order to prepare for the challenge, warriors in the city of divine combat turn to dungeons to train themselves. Throughout the game, played via the familiar mix of illustrations and text for its story progression and top-down tile-based dungeon crawling, players must manoeuvre through the maze dungeons and take on monsters of all kinds, including the ever-important female monsters, which can be captured. Central to the rules of the *Toushin Toshi*, and as is natural in a game focused on a more mature market, each warrior must be accompanied by a woman of beauty and brilliance. In the tournament, the winner is permitted to take the losing party's female companion to replace their own, and sinfully indulge in activities best not put in print.

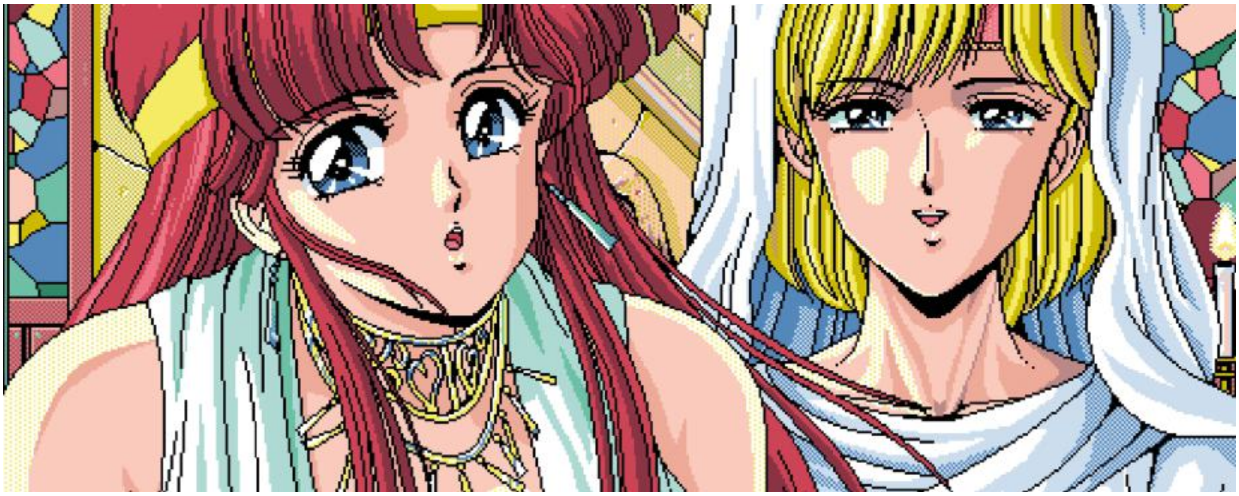
While taking a different direction from the delinquency of *Rance*, *Toushin Toshi* still employs a fair amount of humour and absurdity to tell its story. While sharing the world with *Rance*, *Toushin Toshi* differs from its sibling game in that each game is quite separate, not interconnected, as *Rance* is, even within its own lore, though Rance himself can be found if you look in the right places. This series also enjoyed a long string of sequels over the following decades, which solidified it as a premier adult action adventure, and it's often cited as a fan favourite. With *Toushin Toshi II*, AliceSoft afforded itself more development time than ever before, and a much larger scope than usually given to games in this sub-genre. It might just be AliceSoft's finest game of all time.

Despite the success of *Toushin Toshi II*, which was soon followed by the visual novel gaiden adventure *Toushin Toshi: Soshite Sorekara*, the next instalment in the series, *Toushin Toshi III*, would not appear for another 15 years. Despite its use of familiar gameplay mechanics and fairly high-quality artistry in the character designs, the game was ultimately a pale imitation of *Toushin Toshi II* despite being a decade later; in particular the 3D models for the brand-new fight system were very low-budget. *Toushin Toshi* would, however, not be forgotten, despite this unfortunate setback.

Toushin Toshi II was remade for the Nintendo 3DS in 2014, but Imageepoch ditched the roman number and added the subtitle *Girls Gift RPG*. Obviously, many changes were required to obtain a CERO D (16+) rating. Much of the game uses 3D visuals with revised 2D artwork for characters. The battles in particular are more properly paced, and make use of a brand-new battle system that employs more characters at a time. The women were also given more individual powers and features, to make them more active participants. The game was well received, and became AliceSoft's only Nintendo game.



Toushin Toshi II is one of the very few old-school computer RPGs to be revived with a relatively modern 3DS port.



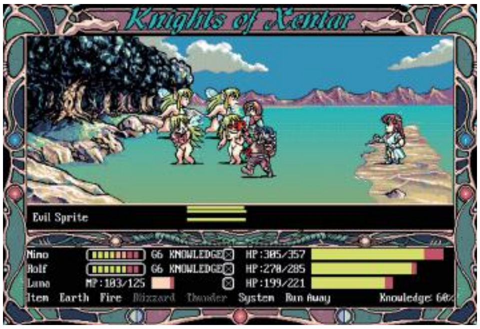
Dragon Knight (series)

Developer: Elf | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): PC88, PC98, X68, MSX2, IBM, PCE, SFC, WIN

Among the publishers of adult computer games in the '90s, Elf was one of the best-regarded. In addition to adventure games like *YU-NO* and *Eve Burst Error*, it also created the RPG series *Dragon Knight*. This begins by focusing on a knight named Takeru, who is tasked with saving the land of Strawberry Fields, by exploring the Goddess Tower and rescuing the kidnapped knights of the kingdom. The first game is presented as a first-person dungeon crawler, but it's all rather simple, as you just play as Takeru, and there are only six floors. Most of the characters, including the kidnapped knights, are female, they are naturally in various states of undress for their rescues.

The sequel is a little more ambitious, giving Takeru two companions for his dungeon explorations. In this game, the women of the kingdom have been cursed to become monsters, and you need the spellbook to save them. As such, all of the enemies are female versions of assorted RPG enemy archetypes. Once they've been rescued, they also pay you night-time visits as a sign of gratitude. Though the dungeon-crawling and battle scenes are simple, the illustrations are quite excellent, showing off how the artists could create attractive designs with merely eight colours in the palette.

Dragon Knight III changes things up, being a more traditional console-style RPG, complete with an overhead perspective. This time, Takeru has been robbed of all of his equipment, and his journey to get it back causes him to learn about his own history. The battles are presented from a side-on perspective, and mostly played automatically, with super-deformed characters duking it out, though you can switch up their commands. This game was actually localised into English as *Knights of Xentar*, complete with a drastically rewritten, incredibly goofy script. The CD version even adds in some absolutely atrocious (and hilarious) spoken dialogue. The retailed version of this cuts out the nudity (dubbed R-13 on the box) but can be uncensored with a patch.

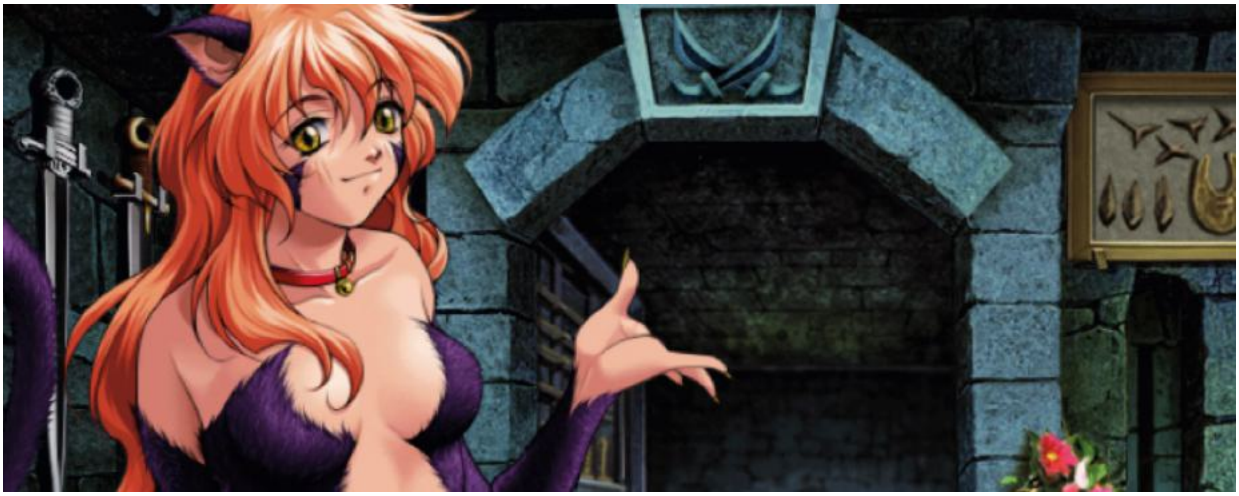


DRAGON KNIGHT

***Dragon Knight* is one of the very few games of this type to have been released in English, with the third game ported to DOS and released as *Knights of Xentar*, though it was heavily altered.**

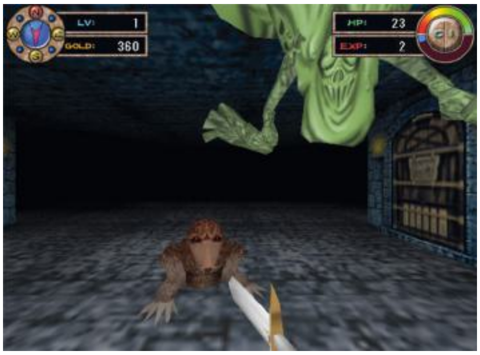
The fourth game in the series ditches Takeru as the protagonist and moves things forward a generation, so you control his offspring. The genre has changed yet again, this time to an SRPG that heavily resembles games like *Langrisser*, though you can still walk around towns, as in *Shining Force*. The art style has changed as well, though generally for the better. After three RPGs that were really kind of simple and tedious, relying heavily on their pretty girls, *Dragon Knight IV* is a legitimately great strategy game that stands pretty well on its own. An anime OVA version was also released, and localised into English.

Most of the games in the series saw releases on console platforms, though these toned down (or removed) the sex and nudity. Some versions also tweaked the game systems, like the PC Engine port of the original *Dragon Knight*, which let some of the kidnapped knights fight with you, and the *Dragon Knight III* port, which switched to a more traditional turn-based battle system.



Words Worth

Developer: Elf | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): PC98, X68, FMT, WIN



WORDS WORTH

The revised character designs in the Windows port of *Words Worth* are an improvement, though the low-budget 3D visuals are laughable, even for the time.

Elf's *Dragon Knight* series went through some transitions between entries, eventually morphing into a strategy RPG. Meanwhile, one of its other RPGs, *Words Worth*, kept to its dungeon-crawling roots, though it takes place in a different world and has different characters. In it, the world is divided up into two tribes: the Tribes of Light, consisting of humans who live on the surface, and the Tribes of Shadow, consisting of humans, demi-humans, and assorted monsters that live underground. Their worlds are separated by the eponymous Words Worth tablet, which has been destroyed by unknown forces, setting off a generations-long war between the clans. You control Astral, prince of the Tribe of Shadows, who sets off to hone his skills.

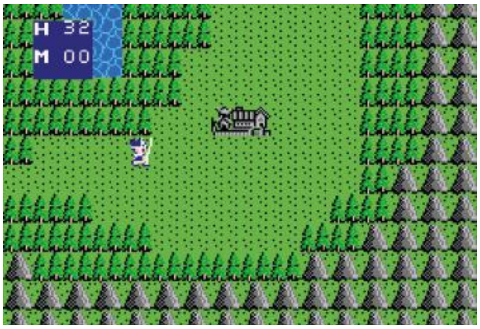
The original IBM PC version plays somewhat similarly to the first *Dragon Knight*, in that you only control a single character, and the turn-based combat consists of simple things like attacking and healing. The scenario is more involved though, with a variety of heroines, including Sharon, the strong swordswoman and childhood friend; Nina, a catgirl who runs one of the shops; Delta, a succubus; and Mew, a sorceress. There are multiple endings whereby you can end up with various girls, though you're only given the choice right at the end. The game is divided into halves, as there's a time skip halfway through, in which Astral loses his memory and must rediscover his purpose.

The Windows 95 remake, released in 1998, is a drastic overhaul. It's believed that this is a reworked version of a Saturn remake of the original *Dragon Knight*, which was cancelled, after SEGA excluded 18+ software from the system in 1997. In this version, the dungeons are fully 3D, and the combat is real-time, so it plays more like *Dungeon Master* than the original game. However, despite the emphasis on action, it's still a fairly straightforward game, focusing mostly on exploration and grinding, with the occasional story or sex scene. The characters have been completely redesigned, using an entirely different art style that is a marked improvement over the original. Nina, for example, looked a little too much like Lum from *Urusei Yatsura*, with her leopard-print bikini and horns, whereas here she's more of a catgirl, with red hair and purple fur. They also look less wide-eyed and cutesy, and the more mature look better fits the dark fantasy style. The story has also been drastically altered, plus there's an animated intro and quite a bit of voice acting. In general, this is considered to be the superior version.

Words Worth never had quite the legacy of *Dragon Knight*, as the title never got ported outside of home computers, and never quite got beyond being a fairly simple RPG designed in service of a story (and for the pornography, of course). But as far as adult fantasy goes, its character designs are memorable, and it did receive an adult anime OVA series, which was released internationally.

Bodycon Quest I

Developer: Hacker International | Released: 1987 | Platform(s): FDS



The quality of the game may be middling, but the packaging of *Bodycon Quest I* is better than that of most official releases.

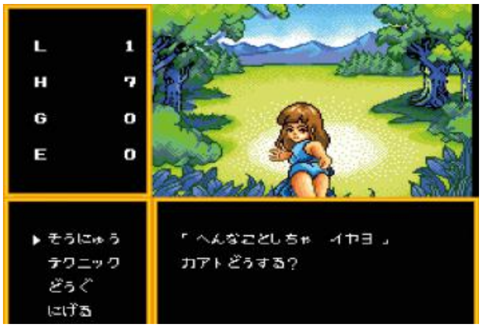
Hacker International, which also operated under names like Super Pig and Indies Soft, was a fairly prolific developer of unlicensed games, many of them pornographic in nature. It got its start on the Famicom Disk System, due to the ease with which disks could be copied and distributed. Their most ambitious title on the platform was *Bodycon Quest I: Abakareshi Musume Tachi* ("The Revealed Girls"). The title works on a few levels: the game involves pretty girls, and the literal conquest of bodies; the subtitle is a parody of *Dragon Quest IV* (*Michibikareshi Monotachi,* "The Guided Ones"); and it's a reference to the figure-hugging bodycon outfits that were popular in the late '80s.

The game begins when the hero turns 14, and he sets off on an adventure to figure out why babies have stopped being born. Even though the visuals are obviously rip-offs of *Dragon Quest*, the game plays much more like *Ys*, as foes are visible on the battlefield and you ram into them to attack. Eventually, you get magic spells, so you can shoot projectiles too. Much of the game simply involves wandering around and grinding up levels, though it's also fairly easy. You eventually rescue a few princesses, who are more than happy to reveal the unusual birthmarks on various parts of their unclothed bodies.

It looks and feels a little cheap, especially since it uses screen flipping rather than smooth scrolling. However, a remarkable amount of work was put into the packaging, which resembles a VHS tape case. The game also comes on two disks, making it larger than most official releases on the Famicom Disk System. As to be expected, it's also quite a pricey collector's item.

Bodycon Quest II

Developer: Hacker International | Released: 1993 | Platform(s): PCE



「へんなことしちゃ イヤヨ」
カアトどうする?

There were plenty of low-effort adult RPGs that were just clones of other games, with cute girls in place of regular enemies, and this is one of them.

Hacker International followed up its first game with a PC Engine sequel. The kingdom of Dekameron ("Huge Melons") has been overcome by a curse, causing widespread impotence, resulting in a declining birthrate. The hero, born of a virgin conception and destined to save the kingdom, is sent off on his 15th birthday on a journey to defeat the magician Topaz and remove the affliction.

Unlike its predecessor, which looked like *Dragon Quest* but was an action game that played like *Ys*, this sequel is a pure *Dragon Quest* clone. When you hit an random encounter, the "enemy" is a cutesy girl, usually in some suggestive pose. Instead of a "fight" command, it reads Insert, instead of "magic" it reads Technique, and includes moves like Lick and Tickle. You'd think the H would represent hit points, but it actually means Ecchi ("pervert") points. When it runs out, your hero runs out of virility and is returned to the king's chamber.

There's not much actual nudity, so much of the adult content is simply communicated via text, with silly names for items or special techniques (including commercial ones like real energy drink names). But as a game, it's barely above the level of the original *Dragon Quest*, which was seven years old at this point. While you do find three party companions, there's still little to the game beyond grinding. The visuals aren't even particularly good, and the animation can be pretty choppy. Some of the comedy is amusing but other parts are painfully dated or just plain gross (homosexual characters afflict your party with diseases). It's generally amateurish, though that's expected of an unlicensed game.

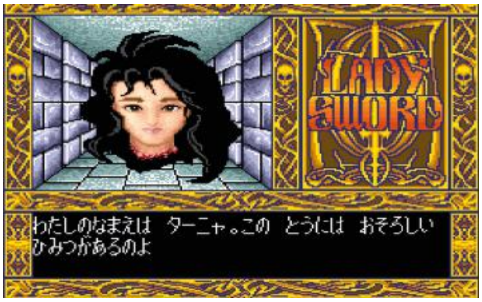
Lady Sword

Developer: Hacker International | Released: 1992 | Platform(s): PCE

Lady Sword is Hacker International's attempt at a first-person dungeon crawler. As far as combat goes, it's extremely stripped back, compared to something like *Wizardry* – fights are one-on-one, there are no magic or special skills, and no equipment, items, or gold. There aren't any experience points either, though technically your max stats will increase slightly as you continue to fight. As there is no home base, or inns of any kind, you can choose to rest anywhere. This will max out your health, but there's also a chance a powerful monster will attack during your break. Quite a lot of this game is down to chance, somewhat mitigated by the fact that you can save anywhere. With the stat management stripped back, the experience is mostly focused on dungeon crawling, and indeed, these mazes are fairly long and complex.

As far as adult games go, this one is incredibly mild. Each floor has a captured maiden you need to rescue. When you rescue one, you get an image of a scantily clad woman … but like Hacker International's fighting game parody *Strip Fighter II*, this appears to be a random image digitised out of a girlie mag, as it doesn't fit with the fantasy theme at all.

There technically isn't any nudity either. Most of these games (including the company's other titles) include female enemies in various states of undress, but here, the baddies could be from any old RPG. Probably the weirdest aspect is that these girls' heads communicate with you as you explore the dungeon, but their faces are mangled or grotesque in some way, exposing muscles or bone beneath their decaying flesh. It's far more unsettling than anything.



わたしのなまえは ターニャ。この とうには おそろしい
ひみつがあるのよ

The disembodied heads that give you instructions make *Lady Sword* feel like the dungeon-crawling equivalent of a Troma movie.

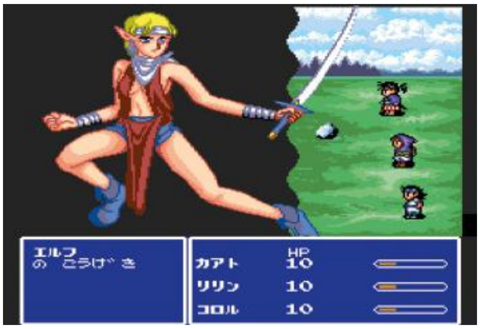
Hi-Leg Fantasy

Developer: Hacker International | Released: 1994 | Platform(s): PCECD

After ripping off games like *Dragon Quest* and *Wizardry*, Hacker International (now calling itself Games Express) finally went after *Final Fantasy*, with its RPG magnus opus, *Hi-Leg Fantasy*. (The title refers, of course, to high-leg women's shorts, bikinis, or underwear.) The protagonist is an adventurer who comes from a Japan-like kingdom, and is shipwrecked in a land where coupling between races is forbidden. After being washed ashore, he teams up with two other fighters to fight against an evil sorceress and bring love back to the land.

The visuals and interface are straight out of *Final Fantasy*, as is the battle system, and even the Job system from the fifth entry. Here, though, everything is a parody – instead of potions you get healed by lotions, Job classes include the Gigolo, Obese Knight, and Acupressurist, with abilities like Catcall and Massage Magic, and there's a town called Chlamydia. Instead of a Chocobo, there's an actual ostrich you can ride. While you have control over three characters, you only fight one enemy at a time, which is represented by a gigantic (zoomed-in) image of a female warrior. As you do damage, eventually you rid her of her clothes. They are thirty 30 types and they're actually fairly well illustrated, considering that (with the jokiness) is the main draw of the game.

The publisher seemingly couldn't beat the copy protection of the PC Engine CD-ROM, so the game came with a Game Express HuCard, which is required to play the game, rather than a standard PC Engine System Card. Since it doesn't have any extra onboard memory, it will only work on PC Engine Duo consoles.



エルフ
の こうけ゛き

	HP
カアト	10
リリン	10
コロル	10

HI-LEG FANTASY

As adult game clones go, *Hi-Leg Fantasy* is one of the better ones, complete with interesting (albeit unusual) designs and a rather amusing class system.

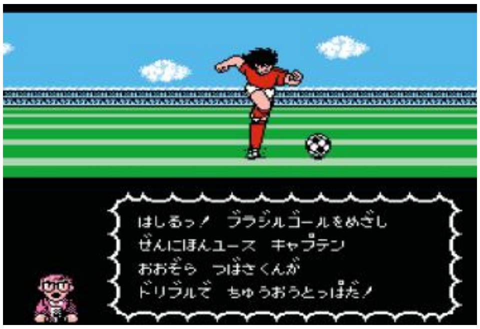
Captain Tsubasa (series)

Developer: Tecmo | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): NES, SFC, MCD

Tecmo Bowl (and its sequel, *Tecmo Super Bowl*) was one of the best American football franchises, particularly in the NES era. Its hallmark was its cinematic cut-ins during dramatic moments – as also seen in the company's *Ninja Gaiden* series, which was famous for its cutscenes. Tecmo really wanted its games to be like interactive movies. For its *Captain Tsubasa* series, based on the famous soccer anime/manga, it created a game that's represented almost entirely with these cutscenes; in practice, it ends up playing like an RPG. There are six games altogether, most of which are fairly similar, though they add original characters, making them worth checking out for fans of the story. The music is outstanding as well, particularly in the second game for the Famicom, which features tracks by Keiji Yamagishi and Mikio Saito, the composers from the *Ninja Gaiden* series, and hence share its signature styles.

On the field, when you have control of the soccer ball, you can run towards the goal, or shoot, or pass to another player. When you encounter one or more members of the opposing team, the action pauses, and competing for the ball is almost like a battle. You can try to dribble around your opponent, or pass the ball to another player. What happens depends on the stats of all of the players involved. You also need to keep your eye on your Guts (stamina) stat, which goes down with every action, and depletes more with special moves. Though it's a little vague, players that take more action in the match will eventually level up their stats.

The first game in the series is a little rough, since you're given a map of the field, but you can't see any other players, at least until you try to pass the ball. The second game, subtitled *Super Striker*, fixes this by showing all players on the field as numbers, giving you a better idea of where to run. Most of the later games use this system too, including the third game for the Super Famicom, *Koutei no Chousen* ("The Kaiser's Challenge"), and an unnumbered entry for the Mega CD, which includes voiced cutscenes. The fourth entry, *Pro no Rival Tachi* ("Pro Rivals"), also for the SFC, is graphically more impressive, but has a number of balance issues and glitches that basically ruin it, while the fifth and final numbered game, *Hasha no Shougou Campione* ("Campione Champion Title"), changes the action to something more like a typical soccer game (although keeping a few RPG elements).



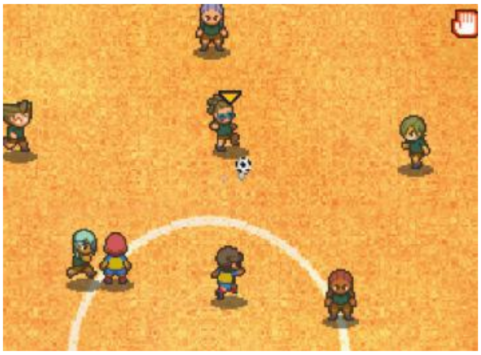
はしるっ！ ブラジルゴールをめざし
ぜんにほんユース キャプテン
おおぞら つばさくんが
ドリブルで ちゅうおうとっぱだ！

The first game in the series was localised for the NES under the name *Tecmo Cup Soccer Game* (not to be confused with the traditional sports game *Tecmo World Cup Soccer*). It was stripped of the *Captain Tsubasa* licence, as the series was unknown in North America, and instead the characters are all new, with hero Tsubasa Ohzora replaced by the blond haired, blue-eyed Robin Field. The Mega CD version was considered for a cartridge release in Europe, but this was cancelled.

Rather than making a typical sports game, Tecmo mixed soccer with RPG mechanics in this series based on the famous manga/anime.

Inazuma Eleven

Developer: Level-5 | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS, 3DS



***Inazuma Eleven's* simple but addictive RPG elements and anime-style over-the-top theatrics make for an amusing combo.**

While the cinematic RPG style of *Captain Tsubasa* faded away after the Super Famicom era, the soccer RPG torch was carried onward by Level-5's *Inazuma Eleven* series, which began in 2008 on the Nintendo DS. While the *Captain Tsubasa* games focused entirely on matches, *Inazuma Eleven* provides a more rounded RPG experience, casting you as an early-teenage student named Mamoru Endou (or Mark Evans), the grandson of one of the most famous goalkeepers in all of Japan. He seeks to live up to his family's lineage, and has a burning passion for soccer, but his school's club is in poor condition, so he seeks to whip it into competitive shape. Mamoru scouts for potential teammates around the campus, and if he manages to beat them in a game of footy, they'll join the team. You compete against other teams in the story mode, and you can potentially recruit beaten opponents there too. Altogether, there are hundreds upon hundreds of potential teammates you can draft.

In the soccer matches, you control your team on the lower touch screen with the stylus. Whenever two characters run into each other, the action stops, and you can choose from a variety of commands – passing, shooting, tackling, and a number of special moves. In other words, it's basically like the *Captain Tsubasa* games. It actually leans into the overt RPG aspects even more, by giving each player one of four elements – the usual fire, earth, air, and water – with strengths and weaknesses that play off each other. Characters also need to manage their FP (Fitness Points, or stamina) and TP (Technique Points, for special moves), while PP (Prestige Points) are used after matches to purchase various items. Small matches are played with four players per side, though more important matches are fought 11-on-11. Players can also challenge each other over wi-fi and trade players with one another.

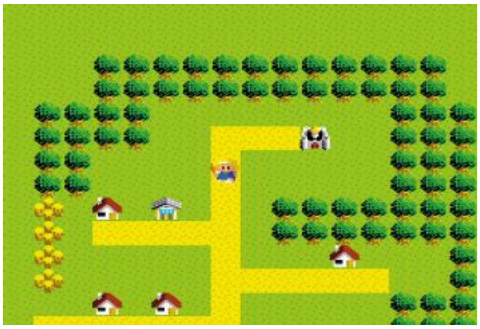
Inazuma Eleven spawned a hugely successful franchise for a spell, with four games on the DS, along with a sequel trilogy called *Inazuma Eleven Go* on the 3DS. Those later entries get much wilder with the story, taking place in a world where an authoritarian entity rules the sport of soccer and sets the matches; the hero Tenma must rise against them. Later games in this series involve time travel and intergalactic matches. There are numerous spinoff games, plus anime and manga series that adapt the stories of the games. For a good while, it was wildly popular, at least in Japan, but internationally it was a bit spottier. Most of the main entries were translated into English (and other languages) in Europe, but the only entry to see release in North America was the 3DS port of the first game, published digitally in 2014. Professional soccer is not as popular in the United States as it is globally, but it's still played in schools. Like *Yo-kai Watch*, another Level-5 franchise, this one has been mismanaged and is currently in limbo.

World Court Tennis

Developer: Namco | Released: 1988 | Platform(s): TG16

World Court Tennis is a TurboGrafx-16 tennis game, ported from an arcade game called *Pro Tennis: World Court*, itself inspired by an earlier Famicom game called *Family Tennis*. In addition to the usual single and multiplayer modes, Namco thought it would be amusing to add an RPG-like story mode. Once you name your character and set your gender, the King of the Tennis kingdom complains that an evil king is taking over tennis courts across the land, making his subjects sad. You are apparently the hero chosen to stop him, so you're given some cash and set off to explore the land.

This mode is cast as a *Dragon Quest* parody. The starting town is "Chicago", at least in the English version, despite its setting in some kind of medieval fantasy world. As you gain money, you can purchase better equipment and clothes. Random encounters occur when various people challenge you to tennis matches – you can reject their requests, and they may or may not leave you alone, depending on how fancy your outfit is. As for the tennis matches, it's still a late '80s sports game, so play is fairly uncomplicated.



Namco obviously liked the concept enough that pretty much the same plot was used in the TG16 racer *Final Lap Twin*, itself a port of the arcade game *Final Lap*. Except, of course, instead of tennis matches, you're challenged to one-on-one races and use money to upgrade your car. It also set down the template used by Nintendo and Camelot in later *Mario* sports games, like the RPG story mode that first appeared in *Mario Golf* for the Game Boy Color and *Mario Tennis: Power Tour* for the Game Boy Advance.

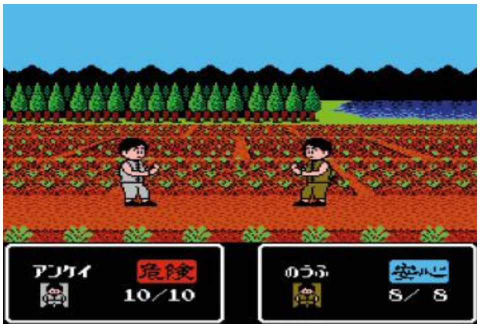
***World Court Tennis* saw the introduction of an RPG mode, a precursor to the story mode found in other sports games today.**

Keru Naguuru

Developer: Game Studio | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): FC

The story modes of *World Court Tennis* and *Final Lap Twin* were kinda slapped on, as a way to give context to the tennis and racing arcade action, but Namco's Famicom versus fighter game *Keru Naguuru*, subtitled *Tenkaichi Bushi* ("Kick-Puuunch: The Strongest Warrior in the World") does a far better job of integrating the action and the RPG elements.

In a land resembling China, you set off from home in order to become a fighting master. Random enemies will pop up, at which point you're switched to a side view, then you and your opponent duke it out. At the beginning, you only have a simple punch move, and a mere 10 HP. As you beat more opponents, your maximum HP will go up. As you hunt around and find items, you can use them to increase your stats, or take on training exercises to increase your jumping power. New moves can be taught by visiting temples and hermits throughout the expansive world maps. Eventually you'll find yourself growing from a weakling to, indeed, the strongest warrior in the world (the game world, anyway), at which point you are challenged by the seemingly invincible Tao Tairah.



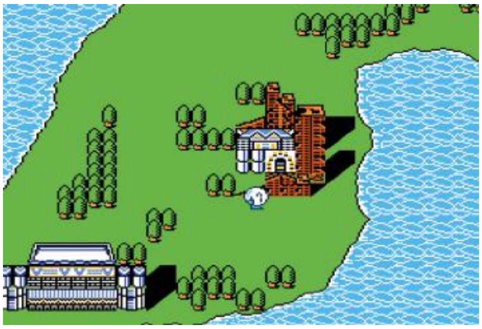
namcot
ケルナグール

Since this sort of versus fighting game predates *Street Fighter II*, the action more closely resembles earlier arcade fighters like *Karate Champ* and *Yie-Ar Kung Fu*, so it can be a little rough going back to such basic fighting. Item management is odd too, as you can only carry one item at a time … and money technically counts as an item. But it's a cool setup, and gives a nod to plenty of other games too, including a tombstone referencing the hero of *Final Fantasy II*, as well as item names from *Dragon Quest*.

***Keru Naguuru* was designed by Namco star developer Masanobu Endou, the creator of *Xevious* and *Tower of Druaga*.**

American Dream

Developer: C-Dream | Released: 1989 | Platform(s): FC



Pachio-kun is an anthropomorphic pachinko ball that was the mascot and star of a number of pachinko simulators. With *American Dream*, he sets off for grander adventures, jetting to the USA (specifically, New York City) in order to become rich through excessive gambling.

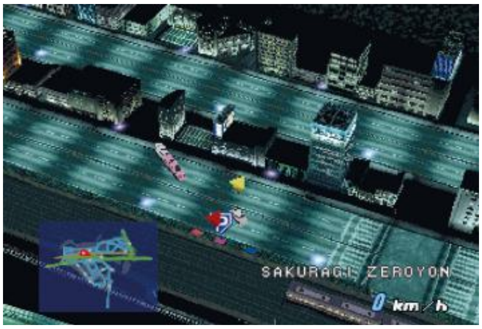
New York City is presented as an RPG-style world map, which is, strangely, covered with greenery, a far cry from the urban expanse of the real place. For the most part, it's really just a framework within which to visit the various casinos peppered around. However, there are occasional random encounters, in which people will challenge you to a dice game, or anthropomorphic slot machines will dare you to give them a pull. The ultimate goal is to rack up cash, either through these encounters or (more effectively) by gambling in the casinos. As your winnings increase, you can eventually leave Brooklyn for the other parts of the city, finishing up in New Jersey.

The role-playing trappings here are extremely minimal, as there are no real stats other than the cash you obtain, and the only equipment is singular items you can find and pick up (your missing passport lets you visit casinos when you start the game, pistols let you protect yourself from muggers when you reach the big city, but you're also liable to get yourself arrested for arms possession). It is one of those games that's fascinating, as an American, to examine just because it presents an extremely warped view of the United States, crafted by developers who may have only seen it through movies. It is also (perhaps unintentionally) critical of the "American Dream" concept, positing that it can be achieved through sheer luck.

The RPG mechanics in this gambling game are limited, but it's still an amusing way to give some meat to what would otherwise be a pretty simple experience.

Racing Lagoon

Developer: Square | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1

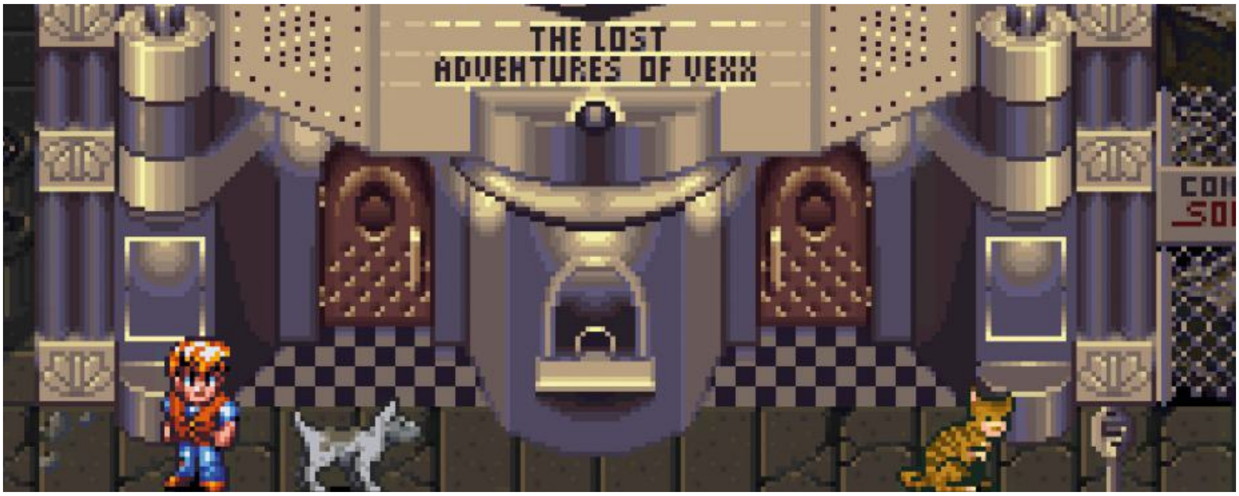


While *Final Lap Twin* for the TurboGrafx-16 was technically the first racing RPG, Squaresoft expanded substantially on idea with their 1999 PlayStation game *Racing Lagoon*, which calls itself a "High Speed Driving RPG". The company experimented quite a bit during this time, including this Japan-only release was produced by Akitoshi Kawazu, with a script by future *Final Fantasy XIII* writer Motomu Toriyama.

The story is very heavily based on the long-running anime/manga *Initial D*, which focuses on street racing, but also weaves in some JRPG tropes. The amnesiac protagonist is Sho Akasaki, who races against various street gangs in Bay Lagoon, while trying to regain his memory. Much of the story is told using some very awkward, vaguely animated CGI characters. Taking place at night, the field map is viewed from an overhead perspective as you drive around. You can challenge any car you come across, or be challenged by other cars in what are basically random encounters, at which point the game becomes a 3D arcade racer. You may need to drive for a certain number of laps, or just for a specific distance. Depending on how well you do, you can then upgrade your Engine, Body, and Chassis, as well as attaching various accessories and cosmetic items.

Racing Lagoon does have a particular sense of style, especially owing to its snazzy soundtrack by Noriko Matsueda (*Bahamut Lagoon*). But the actual driving just doesn't stand up to more popular games like *Ridge Racer* or *Gran Turismo*. The very nature of the racing means that it also gets repetitive pretty quickly, especially since performance often depends on your car's strength.

Square was very experimental during the PlayStation era, resulting in unique genre blends like *Racing Lagoon*. It doesn't always work, but it's fascinating nonetheless.



Secret of Evermore

Developer: Squaresoft | Released: 1995 | Platform(s): SNES

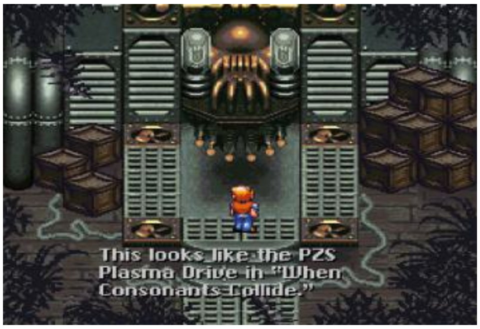
Once the RPG craze had firmly established itself in Japan in the late '80s, Nintendo attempted to replicate that success in North America. At first, they created elaborate strategy guides in *Nintendo Power* magazine (for *Dragon Warrior* and *Final Fantasy*), they toned down difficulty levels (*Final Fantasy IV/II*), and even created an entry-level game (*Final Fantasy: Mystic Quest*). Eventually they figured, rather than localising a Japanese game, why not create a something by Americans, for Americans? That game was *Secret of Evermore*, the only game developed by Squaresoft's North American team.

The story begins in the town of Podunk, USA: an average everyday kid follows his dog into a mysterious mansion, where he finds a mysterious laboratory, and gets transported to the alternate world of Evermore. There are four main areas to explore here, each based on a period of Earth's history: Prehistoria, filled with the usual dinosaurs and cave-people; Antiqua, based on ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian locales; Gothica, based on medieval England and populated with dragons; and Omnitopia, a sci-fi-based segment, taking place on a space station.

As expected from the title, the game positions itself as a follow-up to *Secret of Mana*. It plays almost identically, right down to the ring menu and the stop-and-go nature of the combat. You can even tell that the graphic designers looked to its sprites as an animation reference. There are only two characters – the boy and his dog – though the dog changes forms depending on the period, being a werewolf in the Prehistoria era and a robot toaster in the Omnitopia period, for example. Three of the weapon types – swords, spears, and axes – will seem familiar, while the projectile-firing bazookas are unique to this game. Magic is also different, in that spells don't use MP, but are rather alchemy recipes that consume items.

The concept is solid and the writing is pretty good – although the boy is named after the player, he has a personality of his own, including an affection for cheesy B-movies, often quoting lines of dialogue in appropriate situations. The visuals are excellent too, though the game generally uses a darker colour palette than the lush greens that typify the other *Mana* games. Similarly, the music by Jeremy Soule (later known for the *Elder Scrolls* soundtracks) is excellent, but it's more atmospheric than the usual Square RPG fare.

For a long time, *Secret of Evermore* was regarded with resentment over the belief that it was a replacement for *Seiken Densetsu 3* (the proper sequel to *Secret of Mana*, later known as *Trials of Mana*). It was eventually revealed that it wasn't. Since that realisation, the audience has come to embrace *Secret of Evermore* – it's not quite as good as the SNES *Mana* titles, but its unique personality sets it apart from most everything else of the era. It's also a Western exclusive, published in North America and Europe but unreleased in Japan.


This looks like the PZS Plasma Drive in "When Consonants Collide."

SECRET OF EVERMORE
SQUARESOFT
SUPER NINTENDO

It's not officially part of the *Mana* series, but *Secret of Evermore* still has an interesting take on its particular action RPG style.

Anachronox

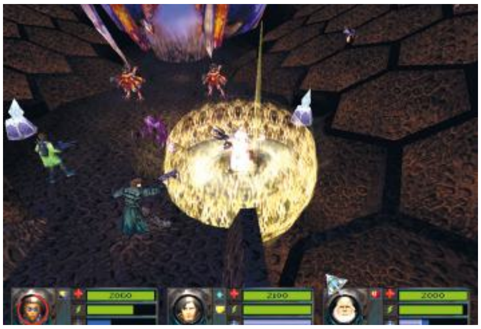
Developer: Ion Storm | Released: 2001 | Platform(s): WIN

Tom Hall was one of the founders of id Software, where he worked on games like *Commander Keen*, *Wolfenstein 3D*, and *Doom*. He also really, really liked *Chrono Trigger*. When he left to co-found Ion Storm, the first game he put out was *Anachronox*, part of a short wave of Western PC RPGs inspired by Japanese games.

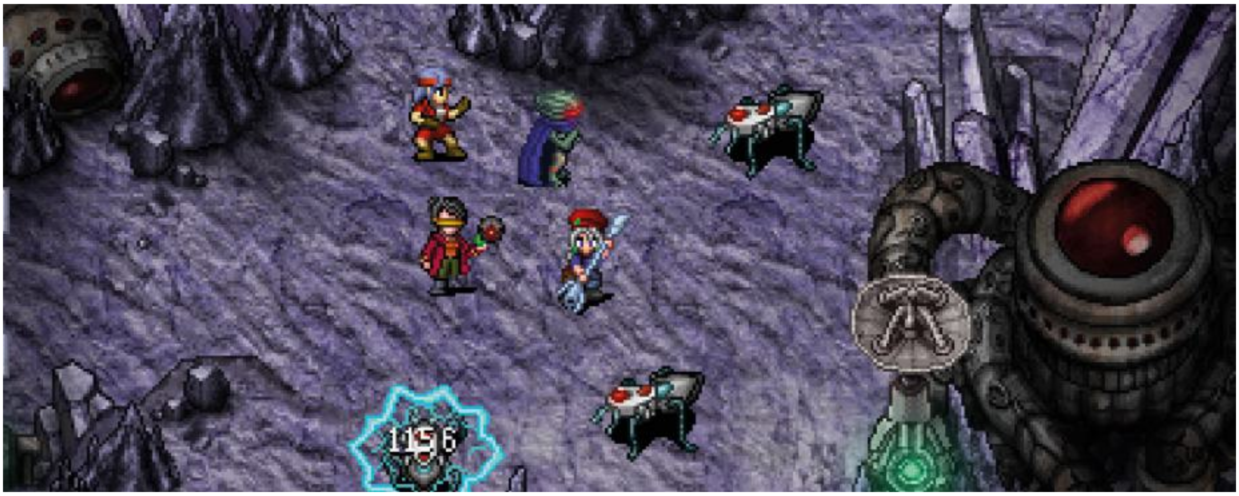
At first glance, *Anachronox* doesn't look much different from *Deus Ex*, Ion Storm's other, better-known game from the era. It's a sci-fi game that stars an out-of-luck detective named Sylvester "Sly Boots" Bucelli, who begins the game trying to wiggle his way out of some debt, before getting involved in a much larger story about the alien Mysterium Technology (MysTech), and a plot to destroy the universe. While it might give the impression of a serious sci-fi game, it's actually quite goofy, having more in common with Douglas Adams than Arthur C. Clarke. (After all, the game does begin with Sly getting chucked out of a window by a mobster.) At least Sly is joined by his (technically dead) secretary, who lives on in a PDA-like device that also acts as the player's mouse cursor. Among the other characters that join your party, there's Grumpos Matavastros, basically an insufferable future dwarf; Democratus, a tiny floating planet filled with miniature people who must hold votes to agree on anything; and Paco Estrella, a.k.a. El Puño, an unemployed, alcoholic superhero. The NPC dialogue is also regularly quite amusing, and its goofiness is more consistent with its universe than, say, the type of humourous dialogue jammed into Japanese games by Working Designs.

Ironically, the Japanese RPG-influenced aspects are probably *Anachronox*'s weakest. When combat occurs, characters are whisked to another screen, and fights play out using what's basically *Final Fantasy*'s Active Time Battle system. Instead of magic there's NRG (Neutron-Radiated Glodents), replenished with certain items, used for MysTech abilities, and the power source for your shield. MysTech abilities can be customised through the use of coloured bugs. Mechanically it's fine, but it's also really, really slow – one of the first patches released for the game included a fast-forward function, and without it, fights are painfully tedious. But at least there's not much of it – there aren't any random encounters, and grinding is never really needed.

Built using a modified id Tech 2 engine, the same basic technology used in *Quake II*, *Anachronox* looks a bit dated compared to something like *Final Fantasy X*, released the same year. This is particularly noticeable in the basic character models. On the other hand, the 3D environments offer more exploration, though some areas are too large, and the game lacks a map. In spite of its fumbles, *Anachronox* has remained a cult classic, largely thanks to its sense of humour. Unfortunately, the game was planned as part of a larger series that never took off, leaving the plot unresolved.



Anachronox **may not look like a Japanese RPG, but its battle mechanics were definitely inspired by them.**



Cosmic Star Heroine

Developer: Zeboyd Games | Released: 2017 | Platform(s): PS4, PSV, NSW, WIN

PS4
COSMIC STAR HEROINE

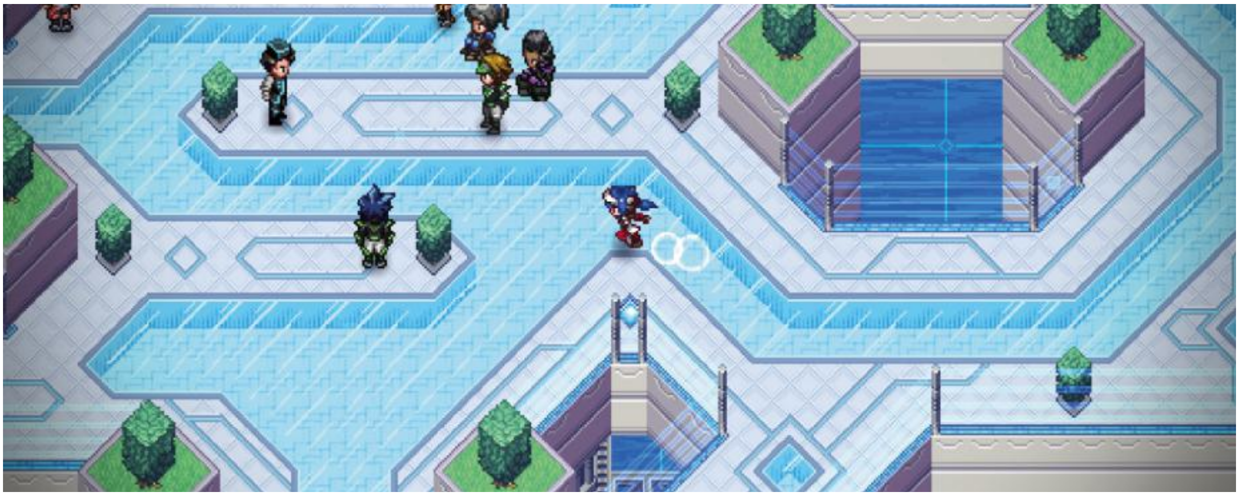
Zeboyd Games is an indie outfit that definitely knows its JRPGs. Its first two RPGs, *Breath of Death VII* and *Cthulhu Saves the World*, were not only humourous tributes to *Dragon Quest*, but also played with their traditional battle systems in interesting ways. This success led them to work on the third and fourth chapters of the *Penny Arcade: On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness* game, which were presented in a 16-bit *Final Fantasy* style. But their most ambitious work is *Cosmic Star Heroine*, which does quite a bit to set itself apart from other indie SNES JRPG tributes.

The game grew out of a desire to have a woman protagonist but without the overt sexualisation found in Compile Heart or Idea Factory games. The main heroine is Alyssa L'Salle, a special agent for the Agency of Peace & Intelligence, an anti-terrorist squad. She and her team learn that her employers are up to no good, so they defect and form a rebellion to stop them. The game's inspirations are clear: it draws from *Phantasy Star* not only by having a leading lady, but also three distinct planets to explore – one with a dense cyberpunk city, another patterned after the Wild West, and one with a jungle populated by various plants. The spritework is obviously based on *Chrono Trigger* (the party members even trail after Alyssa in the same way), while the backgrounds are far more detailed, even more elaborate than 2D 32-bit games. There are occasional cutscenes that act, for example, to introduce characters. As in the CD-ROM games of the era, though, there's no voice acting. The soundtrack, by HyperDuck SoundWorks (*Dust: An Elysian Tail*), forgoes the retro sound for something more modern, and it's all generally excellent.

Zeboyd also seeks to eliminate the tedium associated with JRPGs by making every encounter story-driven, none being random. There is no MP, and while most characters have an attack that can be used as much as you want, other abilities are disabled once they're used, but can all be recharged if you spend a turn defending. Each fighter, friend or foe, also has a Style gauge that increases as the fights go on, increasing their damage and also unlocking powerful Burst moves. If you run out of HP and your Style is high enough, you can also live for one more turn, allowing you to either heal yourself or get in one final blow before you're knocked out. It's clever and consistently engaging, and even aside from the excellent aesthetic, is the best part of the game.

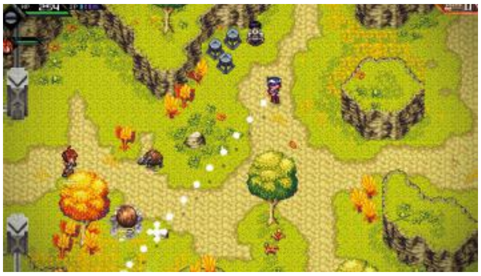
The story doesn't quite fare as well. It borrows the *Chrono Trigger* manner of storytelling in that it's constantly sending you from scenario to scenario so there's never really any downtime, but it's also a short game, at about 10–15 hours. However, there are also 11 characters, and without any real time to develop them, almost nothing about them really hits. The writing tries to emulate Square's style, which varied between goofy and dramatic, but never quite manages to pull off the tone. Still, the fact that it's so breezy makes it very approachable, and allows it to emphasise the excellent battle system.

The visuals and soundtrack of this indie RPG are excellent, but the real treat is the battle system, which goes out of its way to make every encounter feel like a unique puzzle.



CrossCode

Developer: Radical Fish Games | Released: 2018 | Platform(s): WIN, PS4, NSW



PS4
CrossCode

***CrossCode* is a homage to 16-bit action RPGs, but it's much more modern, feeling like one of the more recent *Ys* games, but in 2D.**

Traditional JRPG-style games are relatively common in the indie gaming sphere, thanks to tools like RPGMaker, but sub-genres, like action RPGs, are quite a bit less common. Analgesic Productions *Anodyne* and Cornfox & Bros' *Oceanhorn* both pay tribute to classic *Zelda* games, while Heart Machine's *Hyper Light Drifter* is like a 2D action-adventure take on *Dark Souls*. And then there's *CrossCode*, developed by German studio Radical Fish Games.

CrossCode patterns itself after 16-bit Super Nintendo action RPGs, but it's still very much its own thing. You control a girl named Lea, who awakens without her memory in an MMORPG called CrossWorlds; by joining up with other friendly players, she'll eventually figure out who she is. As a play on the silent protagonist trope seen in many RPGs, Lea literally can't talk, at least at first, and can only communicate through gestures. Eventually, she learns single words, which helps her interact a little more with the people around her.

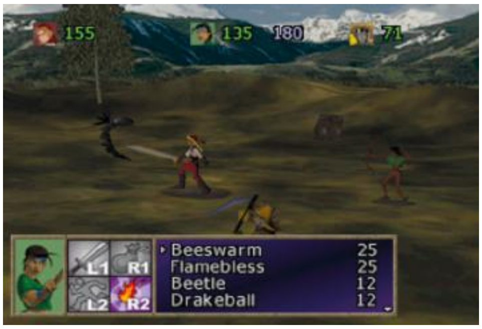
2D action RPGs mostly faded away in the 32-bit era, so in bringing back that style, *CrossCode* feels remarkably modern. It's much, much larger than any 32-bit game, filled with expansive overworld areas, huge dungeons, tons of monsters, plenty of sub-quests, and a trading system. The fighting feels remarkably punchy, with an emphasis on watching enemy patterns, and dodging and blocking their counter-attacks. If you walk away from combat for long enough, you'll regenerate health automatically, though the longer you keep fighting, the higher your combat rank, and the greater the spoils. Along with mêlée attacks, you have a projectile weapon on the right analogue stick, which can produce ricochets – needless to say, this is also used for the many puzzles found in the dungeons. Upon levelling up, you can also customise various stats using a circuit board. You'll meet several other party members too, who will fight alongside you automatically.

The graphics aim for the SNES era, though since the game runs at a higher resolution, the view is more zoomed out, which allows for faster movement without feeling claustrophobic. The characters are charming, and come over quite a bit differently from those in most other RPGs, since they're basically just regular people who are also playing an MMO. The soundtrack is quite excellent too, if not on the level of Falcom or the SNES classics. Like most of the 3D *Zelda* games, there's no jump button, but if you just run off the edge of platforms you'll leap automatically. The height of the terrain can sometimes be difficult to parse and navigate, though.

CrossCode is almost shockingly well-rounded – the combat is excellent, movement feels great, the world is a joy to explore, the puzzle design is excellent, the characters and dialogue are fun, and while the story isn't mind-blowing, there's enough going on to keep it intriguing. Not only does it nail everything about what made these kind of games so great in the '90s, but it surpasses almost all of them.

Shadow Madness

Developer: Big Rain | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): PS1



PlayStation
SHADOW MADNESS

***Shadow Madness* comes courtesy of some former Square USA staff, but they weren't quite able to replicate the success of their old publisher.**

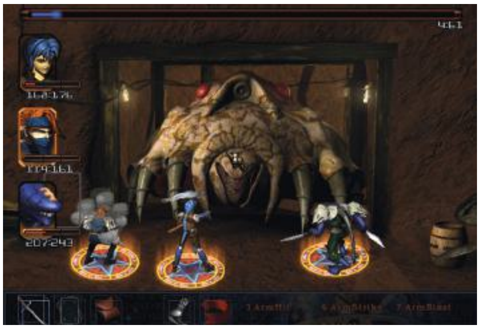
Developed in the wake of *Final Fantasy VII*, *Shadow Madness* was an attempt by an American publisher to capitalise on the mainstreaming of JRPGs. The game was developed by a team of former Square USA members who left the company when it moved to a new location. Not wanting to move, Ted Woolsey, best known for his translation work on *Chrono Trigger*, *Final Fantasy VI*, and *Super Mario RPG*, started Big Rain by leasing the former Square USA space and purchasing assets. *Shadow Madness* was its first title, picked up by publisher ASCII, who eventually sold it to Crave Entertainment.

Shadow Madness centres on a plague spreading across the world and a lead character named Stinger, whose hometown has been wiped out. The game looks and plays like a poor man's *Final Fantasy VII*, but does contain some unique features. Combat is turn-based within an active-time battle, and random encounters can be avoided by pressing L2 and R2 simultaneously when a monster sound is heard. There are some good mini-games and a unique, fully fleshed out story, written by Paul Reed (*Secret of Evermore*, *Metroid Prime*) and told through library entries that could fill a few novels. The game is very easy, and inexplicably caps your level at 15, typically reached by mid-game.

Woolsey's company Big Rain would also be sold to Crave and became "Craveyard", an eerie foreshadowing of the failure of the company itself. *Shadow Madness* would be its only title. Unable to capitalise on the market created by *Final Fantasy VII*, *Shadow Madness* was released to middling reviews and poor sales numbers.

Septerra Core

Developer: Valkyrie Studios | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): WIN, MAC



SEPTERRA CORE

Unlike *Anachronox*, *Septerra Core* borrows the CG-animation look of other JRPGs of the time.

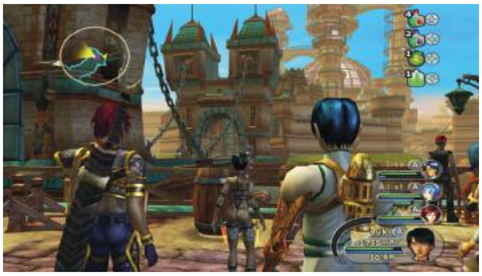
Septerra Core is not a JRPG, but it really, really wants to be. It was made by a collection of fans who loved *Final Fantasy* games and wanted to make their own, in the style of *Final Fantasy VII*. The DNA of that era of Square is felt everywhere: the modified ATB system, the lively party you gather, the mixture of sci-fi and fantasy, the mild themes of capitalist class-ism and the importance of nature, etc. Even the look is clearly inspired by Square's FMV work, complete with the awkwardness of some of the models.

It also has the same major faults, including a battle system that drags because of the flashy animations you can't skip, the restrictive structure limiting who can be in your party, and some difficulty spikes once the game does open up, because you're expected to be at a higher level than you'd think. These problems are a bit worse here, because the newly-designed battle system is tiring to get through. It's not exactly fun to play to a finish because of this, despite all the cool little touches, like two pairs of party members actively hating and attacking each other until you complete their character quests.

Still, *Septerra Core* is charming in its oddity, with a unique flavour all its own, from the gaudy but memorable texture work, to the very likeable cast, all fully voiced. It also, in contrast to *Final Fantasy*, gives you the likeable Maya as a female lead; she's a voice of reason, strongly driven to help people and fight injustice. The story involves a planet stratified into seven layers that rotate around a central core, with the top layer ruling those below, which makes for a pretty cool setting. Overall, it's flawed, but the effort is appreciated.

Sudeki

Developer: Climax Solent | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): XB, WIN



XBOX
SUDEKI

The American Xbox version of *Sudeki* included a review quote from *Maxim,* the men's magazine, representing the target audience for basically everything on the console.

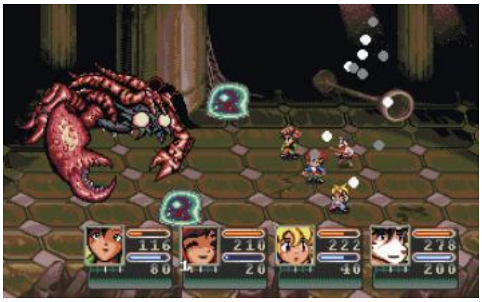
Developed by UK-based Climax Solent (unrelated to Climax Entertainment, the Japanese team behind *Landstalker* and *Dark Savior*), *Sudeki* is an attempt to create an action RPG in the style of a Japanese RPG. There are four characters to switch between, each with different skills used for puzzle solving, with the others controlled by the CPU – fighter Tal can push blocks, princess Ailish can cast dispel magic, beast warrior Buki can climb, and scientist Elco can fly. As mêlée fighters, Tal and Buki can perform combos if you press on-screen buttons; when controlling magicians Ailish and Elco, the perspective switches to first-person, an aspect which makes everything feel fresh.

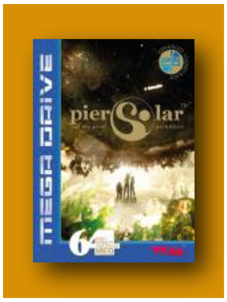
Still, it never really quite comes together. The visual design is lush and colourful, and the character designs sure scream anime, with their colourful hair, and bikini armour on the women. The development team was obviously aware of how attractive many JRPG heroines were, and tried to amp up the sex appeal of the ladies here ... but their models are more uncanny valley than pin-up calendar. The story is rote, neither the writing nor voice acting makes the characters interesting, and the soundtrack is unremarkable. It's also strangely bloody, which is normal for Western action games but feels out of place in a Japanese-style game. It's a little short for an RPG (about 20 hours) and ends up unresolved, waiting for a sequel that never came.

These aspects ended up too alienating for Western RPG players, yet it completely lacked the elements that Japanese RPG players look for in their games. In the end, it didn't please anyone much, though it's an interesting experiment. It was marketed as an Xbox exclusive initially, but eventually hit Windows PCs.

Pier Solar and the Great Architects

Developer: WaterMelon | Released: 2010 | Platform(s): GEN, WIN, PS3, PS4





A long-in-development homebrew effort, *Pier Solar* is a decent enough tribute to 16-bit classics, though not quite up to their level.

Pier Solar and the Great Architects started as a 2004 homebrew title called *Tavern RPG* on the SEGA fan site Eidolon's Inn. The game was ultimately released in 2010 as a SEGA Genesis game with an optional SEGA CD music-enhancement disc by the newly-christened WaterMelon. After a successful 2012 Kickstarter campaign, the game was re-released on various platforms with a graphical upgrade and additional side quests.

Pier Solar stars Hoston, Alina, and Edessot. They are three friends who initially set out to find a magic herb that can cure Houston's ill father, later getting drawn into the fight against a growing evil. Your party of up to five characters fights in a random-encounter, turn-based combat system. *Pier Solar* also introduced a Gather system – instead of attacking, your character can select the Gather command to make their counter go up by one. These points can be either transferred to other party members or used to unleash special spells or abilities.

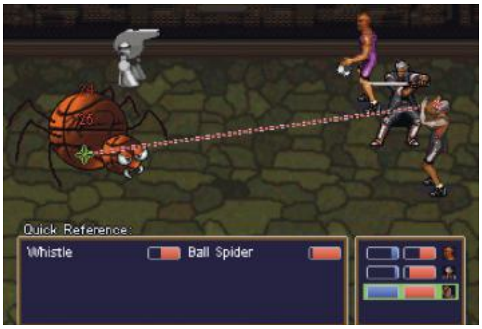
Pier Solar was billed as a "love letter to the rich, imaginative 16-bit RPGs of a bygone era" by the development team, and it does fit that description perfectly, alongside games like *Lunar: The Silver Star*. Unfortunately, this game also inherits that era's gameplay problems. For example, there is often little guidance on how to advance the bland and simple storyline, and players frequently need to grind experience to survive. *Pier Solar* does somewhat make up for this with a gorgeously crafted soundtrack, unique pixel graphics, and well-written characters. Ultimately though, *Pier Solar* struggles in comparison to other RPGs by simply not being a stellar stand-out among other gaming options.

Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden

Developer: Tales of Game's Studios | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): WIN, MAC

It's the "post-cyberapocalypse" in the year 2053. Basketball is outlawed, thanks to ex-NBA star Charles Barkley, who performed a powerful slam called a Chaos Dunk, killing almost all those watching. Now, another Chaos Dunk has been performed, wiping out a chunk of Manhattan, causing Barkley to come out of retirement to hunt down the terrorist organisation BLOODMOSES, thought to be responsible. Along the way you'll meet (and sometimes fight alongside or against) other basketball stars, like Larry Bird, Michael Jordan, and the descendent of LeBron James and a cyborg Vince Carter. Also, the events of the movie *Space Jam* are considered canon within its universe.

This game is insane is the best ways. It was created by people who not only love JRPGs but also find them inherently ridiculous. Despite the routinely absurd machinations of the story, it's played as straight melodrama. Save points feature rants, taken straight from RPG message boards, about the superiority of Japanese games over their Western counterparts. And yet, it's more than just a parody game, because the battle system is actually really well done. Though presented like *Final Fantasy*'s, there are lots of rhythm-based attacks and other elements reminiscent of games like *Paper Mario*.



It's also freeware, because much of the game is ripped from other sources – graphics are taken from several other video games, some tracks are taken from other titles (the boss theme is the incredible "Eternity" from *Blue Dragon*) and even the title positions it as a spinoff of the 16-bit basketball game *Shut Up and Jam*.

Some of the same staff tried to go legit with a sequel called *Barkley 2*, which, though Kickstarted in 2012, has been stuck in development hell for years.

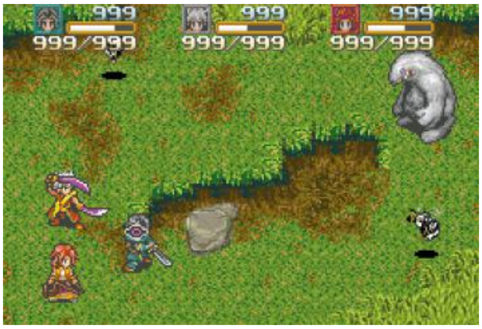
Black Sigil: Blade of the Exiled

Developer: Studio Archcraft | Released: 2009 | Platform(s): DS

Black Sigil: Blade of the Exiled takes place in the land of Bel Lenora, where everyone can use magic … except the hero, Kairu. While he's a strong swordsman, he's regarded with suspicion and mocked as being cursed, which eventually leads to his exile. Supported by his sister Aurora, he sets off into adventure.

Initially known as Project Exile, this game is the work of a small Canadian team called Studio Archcraft, who desperately wanted to make an RPG like the type they had played on the SNES. When it was first revealed as a Game Boy Advance title in 2006, it received quite a bit of hype due to the sprite-based visuals, which were clearly patterned after those of 16-bit Square titles. Then things went silent while it was ported to the Nintendo DS and it finally saw release in 2009.

The spritework is indeed pretty nice – it was a welcome contrast to the iffy 3D RPGs being put out at the time by Japanese developers – but it's so close to *Chrono Trigger*, in both style and animation, that it feels more like a rip-off than a homage. The battle system is also basically *Chrono Trigger*, except movement and positioning matters more, like in the *Lunar* games. So if an enemy is too far away, a character planning a mêlée attack may need to use a turn just to get close to them. But even at its fastest speed, it's slow, and a bit buggy. Worse is the random encounter rate, which is constantly dragging you into tedious fights, which dole out only the tiniest rewards. Considering how long it was in development, it's almost shocking how poorly balanced it is. The story is rote, and while the writing is occasionally amusing, it's not worth suffering through the rest.

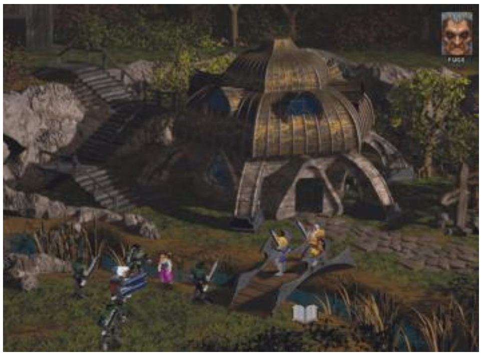


NINTENDO DS
BLACK SIGIL
BLADE OF THE EXILED
E

Another effort by long-time JRPG fans turned professional, *Black Sigil* looks nice but suffers from some debilitating design issues and buggy programming.

Silver

Developer: Spiral House | Released: 1999 | Platform(s): WIN, MAC, DC



Developed by UK-based Spiral House, *Silver* takes place on the island of Jarrah. It initially focuses on a young man named David, who lives peacefully with his grandfather and his wife, Jennifer. Their lives are thrown into chaos when Jennifer is kidnapped by Fuge, the son of Silver, the tyrannical ruler of the region. David sets off on an adventure through the land to take her back.

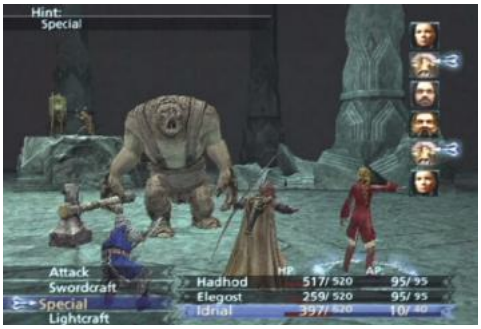
Initially released for Windows, *Silver* borrows the visual style of games like *Final Fantasy VII*, which is to say, polygonal characters walking on top of 2D computer rendered backgrounds. The actual character designs are closer to those of a Western RPG, though it's hard to get a glimpse of what they're supposed to look like, since the camera is always so zoomed out. It doesn't play like any JRPG though, as it's entirely action-based: you point and click using the mouse (on the computer versions) or use the controller (in the Dreamcast version) to move and attack. There are several characters to play as, though you have to pick one, and the rest are guided by AI. The story is the kind that you'd find in a JRPG, which is to say, the main plot focuses on finding the orbs of eight different elements. The fact that David is old enough to be married sets it apart from the teenage cast of a typical JRPG, though, plus it's fully voice acted, which was unusual for the time.

Due to the blend of styles, *Silver* sits at a weird point where the story and world design aren't quite interesting enough for JRPG fans, while the game lacks the depth expected from WRPG fans. But it did find success with those who weren't really fans of either genre, and it is a fun, breezy experience.

***Silver* came at a time when some Western RPG developers were attempting to simplify their games a bit in order to attract a wider audience, à la *Diablo*.**

Lord of the Rings: The Third Age

Developer: Electronic Arts Redwood Shores | Released: 2004 | Platform(s): PS2, XB, GC



PlayStation 2
THE LORD OF THE RINGS
THE THIRD AGE
EA

Along with two action games, Electronic Arts decided to do the obvious thing with their licence to Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* movies, and started work on an RPG in mid-2002. Development was handled by EA Redwood Shores. Considering that background, it makes sense that *The Third Age*, released late in 2004 for PS2, Xbox, and GameCube, feels like a *Lord of the Rings*-coloured coat of paint on the basic skeleton of *Final Fantasy X*.

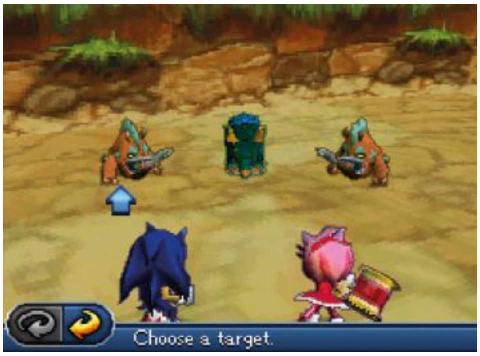
The game covers the events of all three movies but isn't allowed to use background material from the books, since that licence was owned by Vivendi at the time. Instead of playing as Aragorn or Gandalf, the party is made up of secondary characters supposedly glimpsed in the background of the movies, now given names, and the plot runs parallel to the adventures of the main cast. Sadly, none of the characters are particularly engaging. Playing the game often feels like following the stunt-doubles of the better known characters, who join the party occasionally. Chapters are quest-based but pretty linear and straightforward, the battle-system is almost a carbon-copy of the Conditional Turn-Based Battles (CTB) of *Final Fantasy X*. After a good start, the game loses a lot of steam in its latter half, many chapters just consisting of one fight after another. After the battle on Pelennor Fields, the party is whisked away to the top of Sauron's tower, Barad-dûr, where they … pound on the Eye of Sauron? Whatever. There's also a game of the same name on the Game Boy Advance, made by Griptonite; instead of mimicking *Final Fantasy*, that one goes straight for *Fire Emblem*-style tactical battles.

This is basically a Western-developed *Final Fantasy X* with a *Lord of the Rings* licence.

Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood

Developer: BioWare | Released: 2008 | Platform(s): DS

There are a number of games from large Western companies that looked to Japanese RPGs for inspiration, particularly in their battle systems. Both *South Park* RPGs, *The Stick of Truth* and *The Fractured But Whole*, by Obsidian and Ubisoft, respectively, featured turn-based battle systems that are a bit closer to *Final Fantasy* than *Baldur's Gate*. And Ubisoft's *Child of Light*, a side-scrolling RPG with gorgeous visuals and a haunting soundtrack, has a battle system similar to that of *Grandia*, with each fighter having different charging bars that determine when they're going to act, with the ability to interrupt them if the timing is right.



SONIC CHRONICLES
THE DARK BROTHERHOOD
NINTENDO DS
SEGA

But the most interesting, at least on paper, is *Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood.* Based on a Japanese property and developed by BioWare, the team famous for Western RPGs like the aforementioned *Baldur's Gate*, and at this point, riding high on the success of *Mass Effect.* The entire game is controlled using the stylus, with the field presented from an overhead view, as you run around, grab rings, and come into conflict with enemies. The battle system is turn-based, and you're challenged to produce stylus motions whenever you use a special attack; enemies can also run away, requiring that you give chase. Three characters fight in each battle, including most of Sonic's friends from the *Sonic Adventure* games, like Amy, Shadow, and Rouge.

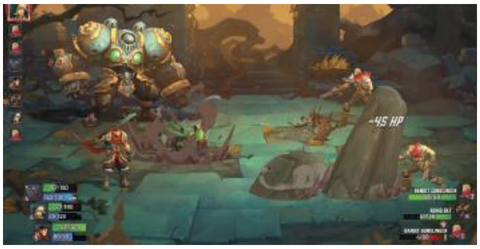
The story and writing aren't as bad as in some of the main games, though it's unlikely to impress anyone that isn't a hardcore Sonic fan. It's not nearly on the level of the *Mario* RPGs though, and can't touch *Paper Mario,* which is better on every level.

Trailing in the footsteps of Mario, Sonic tries his hand at role-playing in this Western-developed DS game, though his exploits aren't quite on the level of the plumber's.

Battle Chasers: Nightwar

Developer: Airship Syndicate | Released: 2017 | Platform(s): WIN, PS4, NSW, XB1, MAC, IOS, AND

A follow-up to the late '90s *Battle Chasers* comic-book series, *Nightwar* continues the story of pre-teen heroine Gully and the ragtag guardians who protect her, and her missing father's legendary gauntlets, from the forces of evil. This self-contained interlude sees the heroes stranded on a once-prosperous island, where their efforts to escape entangle them in the machinations of a shadowy sorceress with ambitions too dangerous to ignore. *Nightwar*'s action centres on exploring dungeons randomly recombined from premade modules, in which players solve puzzles, collect tiered loot, and fight their way to the dungeon boss. Despite its sharp character writing, *Nightwar*'s story is pretty thin; its real selling point is its turn-based combat system, which derives considerable depth from its mechanics for manipulating turn order and for generating Overcharge, a temporary mana surplus designed to encourage skill use in regular encounters.



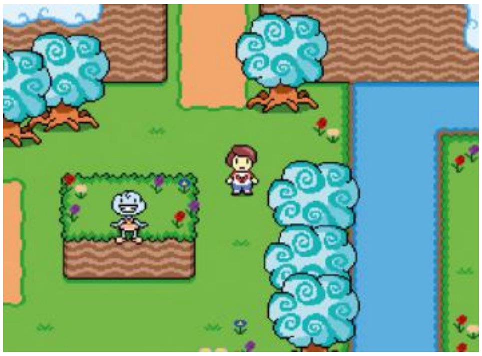
BATTLE CHASERS
NIGHTWAR

Though developed in America, *Nightwar* is often labelled a JRPG by press and players. Creative director Joe Madureira, who previously headed the *Darksiders* games, points to classic JRPGs as a major inspiration for *Battle Chasers* from the very beginning, and cites such series as *Final Fantasy*, *Suikoden*, and *Lunar* as broadly influential. This influence is palpable in *Nightwar*'s side-on combat presentation, its mix-and-match party-building, and its dungeon-dotted overworld map. Nevertheless, Madureira himself suggests that with its preferential focus on combat and loot systems over plot and character development, *Nightwar* would be more aptly classified as a "dungeon crawler with a story". Altogether, *Nightwar* manifests its love for classic Japanese RPGs not as imitation or homage but as one component in a synthesis of diverse influences.

The JRPG-style combat of *Battle Chasers* is familiar, but the randomly-generated dungeons and Western comic book style give it its own flair.

Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass

Developer: Kasey Ozymy | Released: 2018 | Platform(s): WIN



This indie RPG borrows liberally from *EarthBound*'s aesthetic, but its story, about an empathetic child, is interwoven beautifully with its mechanics.

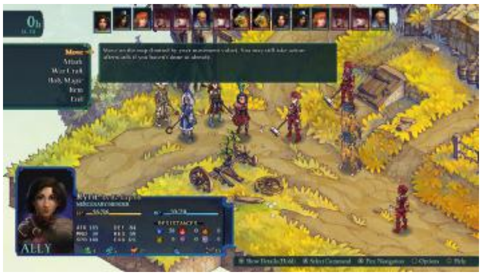
Indie game developers love *EarthBound* (to be fair, pretty much everyone loves *EarthBound*), so it's inspired a number of tributes, especially warranted by the long drought since 2006, when *Mother 3* came out. One of the best of these is *Jimmy and the Pulsating Mass*, which draws from a number of other JRPGs, in addition to the Japanese cult classic adventure game *Yume Nikki*.

The entire game takes place inside the dream world of eight-year-old Jimmy, with the rest of his family acting as the party members. His older brother Buck is kind of a bully, but a good physical attacker; his Mum is a fantastic healer and also unaffected by status effects; his Dad is a skilled magician. But Jimmy is the most powerful, because he is empathetic. After defeating any of the oddball boss monsters – a blob, a vampire, etc. – you can share in their pain, and then gain the ability to transform into them. This is not only useful for battle, since the extra forms have a whole bunch of abilities, but also supplies field skills that can be used on the map. The forms technically level up separately from Jimmy, but will also grant him permanent stats boosts for his main form, and eventually allow him to inherit some abilities for his own use.

This unique take on the *Final Fantasy* Job system is clever, though the heart of the game is really the story. It's alternately charming and frightening – Jimmy's subconscious isn't all clouds and rainbows, as it first appears – but this results in a story that's both trippy and powerful. The only snags are technical in nature, as a result of its development using *RPG Maker*.

Fell Seal: Arbiter's Mark

Developer: 6 Eyes Studio | Released: 2019 | Platform(s): WIN, PS4, NSW, XB1



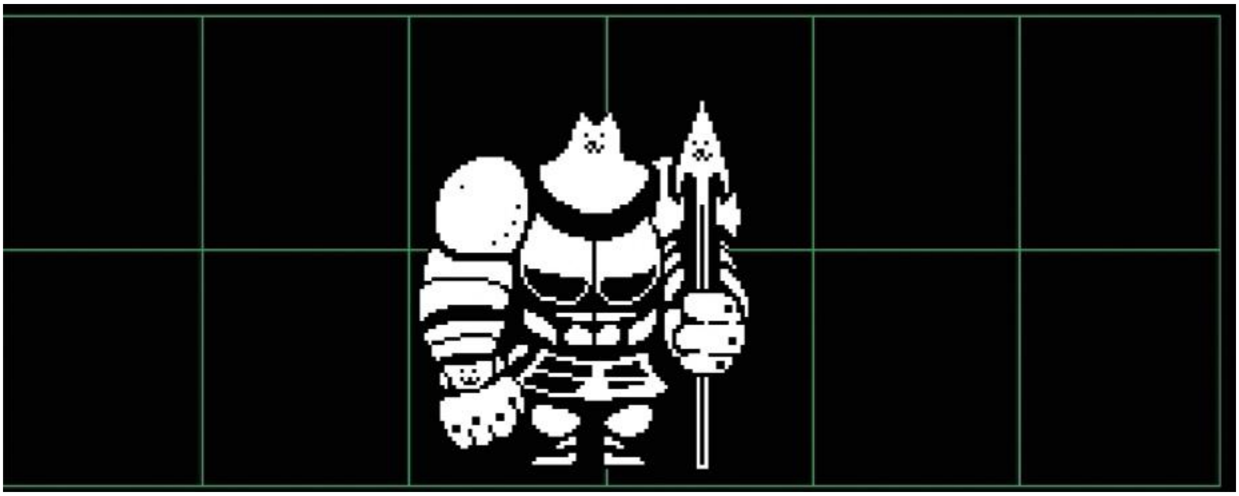
Fell Seal
Arbiter's Mark

Together with Kadokawa's *God Wars*, *Fell Seal* is a nice throwback to the days of *Final Fantasy Tactics*, still one of the best SRPGs of all time.

While there have been some quality entries in the genre over the years, *Tactics Ogre* and *Final Fantasy Tactics* jointly remain the apex of Japanese strategy-RPG design. *Fell Seal* shoots for the stars with this spiritual successor, and succeeds in some ways while faltering in others.

The bad: the plot and writing are just nowhere near the level of Matsuno's storytelling, and the music, while decent, can't match the highs of Hitoshi Sakimoto's and Masaharu Iwata's legendary soundtrack. The character artwork is Western fantasy-styled, with the units being more realistically proportioned than the squat sprites of JRPGs, but it still never looks quite right. The backgrounds are nicely illustrated, but since they're 2D, they also can't be rotated. The high-definition visuals are certainly much more modern though.

The good: the class system is basically identical to the *Final Fantasy* Job system, which is still the best of its type, and there are plenty of classes to pick from. Both *Tactics* games are also over 20 years old, so there are plenty of welcome quality-of-life adjustments, including a wide variety of difficulty tweaks. When a character's health is depleted, they are "injured" and lose stats until they heal, adding consequences without making it too hard (though you can enable permadeath if you want). Also included is a crafting system, as well as a monster-taming/collecting system added as downloadable content. Considering that *Final Fantasy Tactics* never got a true sequel – the *Advance* games are alright but not quite the same thing – and neither *Tactics* game is available on modern platforms outside of a smartphone port for *Final Fantasy Tactics*, *Fell Seal* is about the closest anyone has managed.



Undertale

Developer: Toby Fox | Released: 2015 | Platform(s): WIN, PS4, PSV, NSW

In *Undertale*, you take on the role of a human child who's fallen into an underworld full of monsters, and must escape. During their time in the Underground, they learn of an impending war, led by the King Asgore, who plans to break out onto the surface and attack humanity. That simple premise leads into one of the strangest, warmest, funniest role-playing games ever made, resulting in a surprise indie smash.

As with most RPGs, there is combat. When you attack, you need to stop a power meter at the right point to inflict the most damage. When an enemy attacks, you defend yourself within a square in the middle of the screen, where you control a heart that must dodge a barrage of fire, sort of like a bullet-hell shoot-'em-up; the firing patterns are different with each enemy. Most of these enemies are actually either cute or just plain ridiculous, to the point where you might feel bad about trying to kill them. But that's also the point, as you can talk to them, following various branches involving conversation or actions until they leave you alone. Across the underground world, you meet an assortment of oddball characters, like Papyrus the overbearing, enthusiastic skeleton, and his laid-back brother Sans, the nerdy reptile Dr. Alphys, and badass fish knight Undyne. There's also a killer computer called Mettaton who'll place you in a game show of death, not to mention the several other minor characters that only appear as mooks in combat. How you choose to treat these characters, whether you beat them up or show them friendship, determines how the story concludes. The game's pretty short, taking five hours to complete, so it doesn't take much time to start over and try another route. The sense of humour often veers into the meta, as it's well aware of RPG tropes, and uses its quirkiness to deconstruct them. It's similar to *Moon: Remix RPG Adventure*, which was cited as an inspiration for the title.

I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WILL SOLVE THIS CONUNDRUM!

Much of the game is the work of Toby Fox. The retro-styled field visuals are a little simple, but the monochromatic fight scenes look like silly notebook doodles. The soundtrack is mostly retro-styled, with plenty of fight songs and one particular track that pays tribute to *Final Fantasy VI*'s opera piece. It's definitely the work of one talented auteur, who had an incredibly silly vision that developed into an internet cultural phenomenon. Fox got his start in games by dabbling in *EarthBound* ROM hacks, most notably one called *Halloween Hack*. *Undertale* has the same sense of tender affection and aloof goofiness as Nintendo's classic, but nonetheless carves out its own unique identity.

When it was first released, Japanese gamers could only play it with a fan translation. An official version was released a little while later, and while it's generally agreed to be of high quality, hardcore fans argued about some translation choices. Considering how often these conversations have been had among the English-speaking JRPG audience it's comforting to know that things are basically the same on the other side of the Pacific.

***Undertale* is one of the great indie success stories, a tremendous game with personality and heart.**

Moon: Remix RPG Adventure

Developer: Love-de-Lic/Onion Games | Released: 1997 | Platform(s): PS1, NSW

ラスマエーダがあらわれた
F.S.L.

Ever since the beginning of video games, people have asked the question: what do little digital characters do when there aren't any players controlling them? Do they live their own little lives? Disney tried to answer this a few times in movies, including 1982's *Tron* and 2012's *Wreck-It Ralph*. Sandwiched in between these two was the Japanese PlayStation game *Moon: Remix RPG Adventure*. Despite its name, it's not technically an RPG, but rather an adventure game about RPGs; it proclaims itself to be an "anti-RPG".

The opening recalls the joys of youth, starring a young boy who has recently purchased a *Final Fantasy*-style RPG called *Fake Moon*. He stays up long into the night to play it, only to have his mother yell at him to go to bed. As he snoozes, he finds himself transported into the world of the game, a realm called Love-De-Gard. He does not find himself taking on the role of the game's hero, however. Instead, at first, he's invisible. Soon you, as the boy, find a place to stay at an old woman's house; she mistakes you for her missing son. You cannot exist long in this fantasy world though, as eventually you'll evaporate, but you can prolong your stay by earning love points gained by performing various tasks in the world.

Meanwhile, the hero, the one that's supposed to be saving the world, is too busy breaking into people's houses to steal their stuff and murdering animals for their experience points; in other words, he acts as players generally do in this type of RPG. So some of the things you need to do just involve picking up after the chaos they've caused, like reuniting souls with their dead creatures, but others aim to solve the problems of the kingdom's populace. The game has a knack for combining tragedy and comedy in effective ways, acting as both a meta-commentary on role-playing games and a loving tribute to them. The characters are claymation models, and over 30 indie musicians provided songs for the eclectic soundtrack.

Moon was a cult hit in Japan, having been developed by a newbie studio called Love-de-Lic, founded by former Square employees Kenichi Nishi and Taro Kudo. The company dissolved after 2000, but their style of game continued in other titles, including *Chibi-Robo!*, in which you control a tiny robot as he attempts to clean a messy household and mend a broken family, and *Captain Rainbow*, where you play as a superhero on an island filled with washed-up Nintendo characters. Writer Yoshiro Kimura also brought his particularly quirky sense of humour to games like *Chulip*, where the goal is to kiss as many people as possible, and whose studio, Onion Games, resurrected *Moon* for a 2019 release on the Nintendo Switch. While the PlayStation version was Japan-only – the English-speaking audience likely didn't have enough experience with Japanese RPGs back in 1997 to really get what it was parodying – this version has been released internationally in 2020, so English speakers can finally appreciate this touchingly silly classic.

***Moon* deconstructs RPG conventions in ways that are both hilarious and heart-rending.**

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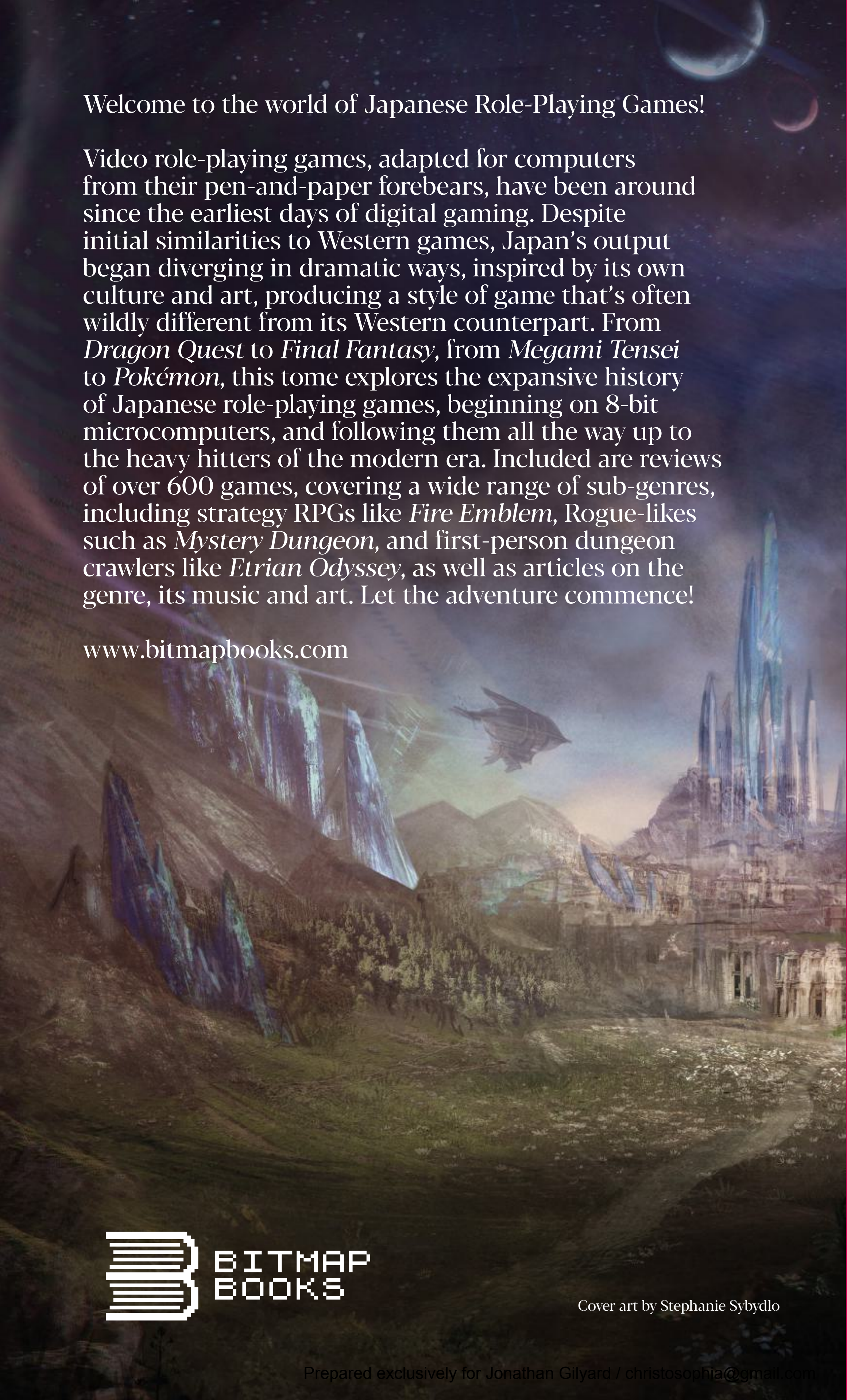

Welcome to the world of Japanese Role-Playing Games!

Video role-playing games, adapted for computers from their pen-and-paper forebears, have been around since the earliest days of digital gaming. Despite initial similarities to Western games, Japan's output began diverging in dramatic ways, inspired by its own culture and art, producing a style of game that's often wildly different from its Western counterpart. From *Dragon Quest* to *Final Fantasy*, from *Megami Tensei* to *Pokémon*, this tome explores the expansive history of Japanese role-playing games, beginning on 8-bit microcomputers, and following them all the way up to the heavy hitters of the modern era. Included are reviews of over 600 games, covering a wide range of sub-genres, including strategy RPGs like *Fire Emblem*, Rogue-likes such as *Mystery Dungeon*, and first-person dungeon crawlers like *Etrian Odyssey*, as well as articles on the genre, its music and art. Let the adventure commence!

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ジャパニーズロールプレイングゲームの世界へようこそ！本書ではドラゴンクエストからファイナルファンタジー、女神転生からポケモンまで、8ビットのマイコンから始まり現在の大ヒット作品の数々を生み出すに至ったジャパニーズロールプレイングゲームの広大な歴史を探求します。紹介文だけでなく、ファイアーエムブレムなどのシミュレーションRPG、不思議のダンジョンなどのローグライクゲーム、世界樹の迷宮などの主観視点によるダンジョンRPGを含む、サブジャンルまで幅広く網羅した600以上のゲームレビューを収録しています。

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